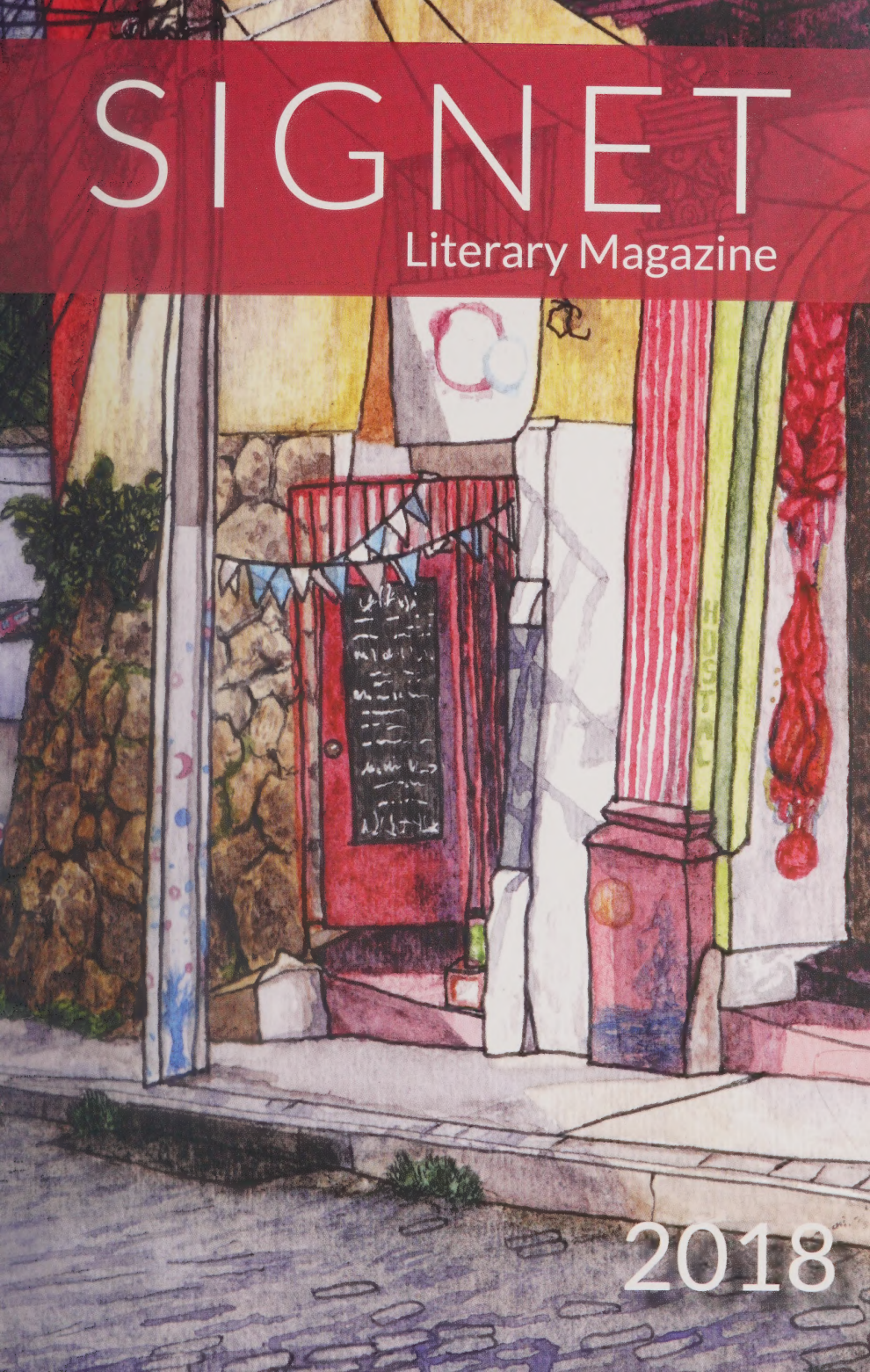
SIGNET

Literary Magazine



2018

SIGNET

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LETTER FROM THE DITORS

Dear Wonderous Queens Readers,

I feel that the most important thing I have to say to everyone is how incredible it really is that we're capable of making something so technically sound with nothing but a good team and hard work. That may sound like a brag on my part, but you're not off the hook—you're part of this team too. It's amazing that the magazine starts and ends with the same people, and that from creator to reader the work stays with Queens. As a group, we have a far stronger voice than any of us may ever realize, and I think it takes something like Signet for us all to realize how powerful that can be. You're all artists, and I love that about you.

More than the magazine, I want you to keep making art. The magazine will always happen if you keep writing, drawing, and taking those fantastic photos. I want the magazine to be something you all can see yourself in, and I'm really thankful to have been able to be a part of the process for the last few years.

It's been a great one,
Ro

LETTER FROM THE DITORS

Dear Readers,

Every year, I am blown away by the sheer talent and innovation displayed through the various arts and literary works created by the Queens students. This year is no exception to the outstanding quality of submissions. Truly, it has been a joy to read every work and be a part of such a dedicated "behind the scenes" team. Thank you to the entire Signet Literary Magazine staff for going above and beyond to compile this beautiful collection. I cannot express my amazement for the devotion everyone displayed this semester for the continuity of the magazine.

Many thanks to Professor Renfroe and Ro for forming such a strong leadership team. Serving as Junior Editor underneath of you has been such a joy.

And thank you to YOU, reading this copy now. This magazine is so special to Queens culture because it is created by students, for the students, featuring student work. Since the early 1900s, the literary magazine has held the artistic treasures of the Queens voice. Thank you joining us along the journey.

Keep writing,
Megan Rosenthal

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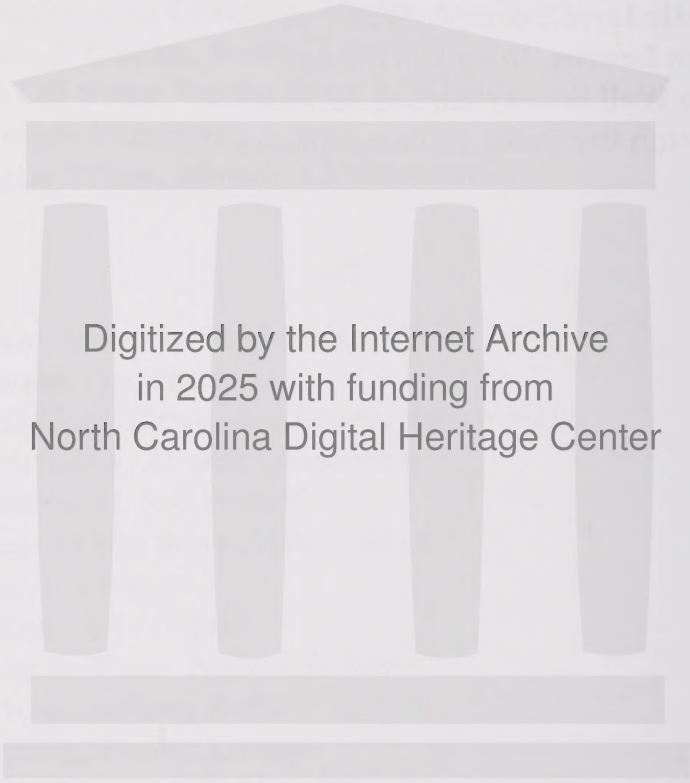
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Interview with the Honorable Vi Lyles, Mayor of Charlotte and Queens Alumna

Janyce Wardlaw

JW: Queens University is taking its place as a premiere liberal arts university with growing diversity and inclusion, and global reach. When you reflect on your time at Queens, what are some aspects you believe have served you in your career endeavors? In life?

VL: I graduated in 73. So it was a time when women's colleges were beginning to have to go through what I call transformational change. Many people...when I came to Queens there were 150 people or so in my freshman class and by the time I graduated I think there were half and part of that I think was the impact of women's studies, women being able to go to co-ed institutions. A lot of women would go to Queens for two years and transfer to a co-ed school or they would come and they would meet people, men that they were going to marry or have relationships with at Davidson... and Davidson had just begun to admit women students on their campus. And so when you start thinking about the transformation of women's colleges, Queens was at that point where they were having to address that and I think over the next several years you saw a decline in enrollment because women had more choices and eventually those choices caused Queens to change. A lot of alum kind of looked at it and said oh I'm not certain about this. What made Queens special was single-sex education and there's a lot to be said about that. For me, the aspects that I believe helped serve me long-term was the joy of learning and having faculty that really cared about you understanding how to process information, how to present information, and how to be a part of the learning process. So, I think that those were all very important for me at Queens and

perhaps gave women confidence at the time to do a number of things that perhaps you would not have learned in a co-ed institution. But transformation has happened and it's happened more rapidly in today's society all the time and I think Queens has really made a difference and the idea that if you're going to be a part of our future you have to keep up with it and that means the ideas around becoming more global, becoming more a career institution in a world that is very diverse and I think that's what Queens is doing. But you asked me what aspects served me in my career, in my life and I think the thing that Queens gave me for life were the opportunities here in Charlotte and the relationships that I have. For example Elise Barksdale was the registrar and she and I have worked on many things together to benefit social causes in Charlotte during my time so it kind of gave me a new home. I grew up in Columbia, South Carolina. But Queens, as a young woman, my internship opportunities, the opportunities that they gave me to meet people not just on the staff but the people that were my professors and the greater community...those were entrees that I had from Queens.

JW: As you embark upon your history-making tenure as mayor of Charlotte, what do you see as the vital issues we are facing?

VL: I really believe that we've got to address the economic disparity in our community by creating good-paying jobs, making this a place where people can afford to live, that we continue to have great and safe neighborhoods. But an overarching part of this is we have to recognize our history and the impact that segregation has had on our community and why people are not able to participate in the economics of our city; that we have lots of history surrounding discriminatory governmental policies. That's not only race but it also can be gender. So when you've lived with that for so long you take it for granted and you don't realize that these outcomes that we have along economic disparity are because of many things the government did. The ability to get a loan from a bank to buy a

house, to get a job. There was an issue around racial segregation and racial discrimination that we have to recognize that's played itself forward for many, many years. So, we've got to own that as a southern city and a southern progressive city we like to really own it and make a difference so that's important. Also I think the issues around Charlotte are that at some point again, the economy is going to change and we've got to grow a talent base, a workforce that will be ready to adapt more quickly. So education at our universities, at Queens, in our school system, all of those things are foundational to the city's success going forward.

There are all kind of issues around affordable housing. Affordable housing in some respects just depends on where you are at what point in your life. So, if five students choose to live in a three-bedroom apartment that costs 2000 dollars that might be affordable if all of them divide that up. But if they decide that as their careers progress and is on a track where they're going to be a teacher or if they're going to work in social work or if they're going to do things that perhaps women don't get paid as much or people don't get paid as much in those jobs then that's going to be a problem for them. As other people ascend in their income and earnings then they're going to be able to make decisions that are perhaps not open to everyone. So we've got to look at this in a way that, yes affordable housing with the development pressures that we have is going to be a huge issue for our community. I want to live in a diverse community. I don't want everyone to live in an expensive home, a penthouse, or a condo. I want people that bring diversity of opinion and that means we have to have jobs for diverse groups of people and that means we have to have diverse price points for housing.

JW: Signet reflects a community of creativity and expression at Queens. Do you see this factoring into the success for someone seeking to do what you do?

VL: You absolutely have to know how to write. You have to be able to communicate. I think good writers are often good speakers, not necessarily all the time but if you can put something down on paper it lasts forever. Now some people may argue that the internet will last forever. But I still believe the written word makes a true difference in how people communicate and even if it's 140 characters you need to learn how to express that in a way that's intelligent and it would be something you could look back on and say I'm proud that I knew I could express myself that way and I could do it well. So I think having a literary magazine, and Signet is that for the campus, is very important.

JW: Tell us your best kept secret about your Queens experience.

VL: I took a women's history class under Dr. Molly Davis who now lives at the Cypress retirement home and I'll never forget walking down from the campus two blocks to a home that was owned by Queens, a Tudor house that was not well-maintained. It was drafty but it was a place that faculty lived and she would have her classes there and she taught women's studies, women's history and I just remember so much the engagement, the opportunity to have dialogue and I think that's what Queens really created. I just think that that's the secret and they talk about secrets... but the secret of Queens is the ability to make you feel like you were at a university where you felt like it mattered. You mattered to your professors, you had the opportunity to dialogue with them but they also encouraged you to think differently and to do things in a way and I remember we actually had conversations about topics that most people would take for granted now. But I just remember that being an important part of my time at Queens.

JW: What book is on your nightstand or in your Kindle?

VL: Oh gosh I've got so many right now. I am reading a lot about government and how to get things done. So there's a lot of work around simplifying...this book is called Thinking Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman. When I get a chance to read fiction, I read a lot of mystery novels. But one of the other books that someone has given me is by a local artist and it is Color and Character: West Charlotte High and the American Struggle Over Educational Equity. I haven't read it yet but Pamela Grundy is a local writer who has chronicled the change in Charlotte. So those are the kinds of things that I try to pick up and read. I don't have any favorites. I read a lot. But I'm always trying to read things that will help me think better. I love reading. I try to read for fun but I don't get to do that much anymore. They call it escapism reading. Sometimes picking up a John Grisham book is not a bad thing. I've got Homecoming, by a new African-American writer and it's been on my desk for eight months and I haven't been able to pick it up yet.

Lullaby

Gabrielle Girard

She bleeds lipstick, hung in a frame above
My bed. She left when I was only three:
She packed it all up thinking nothing of
TV dinners and empty seats and me.
Since then I've been scared of monsters and mice,
I'm all spiny and fanged with tufts of fur,
Prom dress shopping alone with eyes of ice,
She made me this. It's all because of her.
My dreams are gruesome with art or slaughter.
I hold her down and peel her ribs apart,
On a stage alone, crowned world's worst daughter.
Even now, I am only looking for a heart.
I lie awake in her forgotten sweater,
Setting traps, forever a ghost's debtor.

Smoker

Julia Debski

He collected his women in cigarette cartons
Lit them and dragged them, flicked their ashes out
Stubbed them out into crumpled buds and crammed them
in his pocket.
He kept me lit between his fingers for so long,
Told me I was the smoke held in his lungs,
But I was meant to be more than his nicotine relief,
Or the smoke in someone's eyes.

I Was

Bethany Hensley

I was seven when I was taken away from my home. Too young to understand; old enough to remember. I was nine when I found out it was because my mother was an alcoholic who abused my older brother when she was drunk. She was always drunk. I was maybe eleven when I last saw my brother; he would have been fifteen. I was thirteen when I last heard from him. Fifteen when I gave up trying to find him when I realized he gave up trying to find me.

I was sixteen when I got my first period. No one told me what it was. It took a while to stop freaking out. They told me I was lucky to start so late in life. I didn't feel lucky, never did. It started later in my life than they will ever know. I graduated high school when I was nineteen. Twenty when I found out I was the first in my family. Didn't feel so stupid then.

I was twenty-three that I started dating. I had to make sure he wasn't like my brother, or my mother, or my father. I was twenty-five when I got married. A stranger came to my wedding, wearing a familiar face. His shoes were mud-caked, but his shirt was pure white. He lingered at the edge of the church, next to the last row of the pews. I started to go up to him, but he shook his head. He left a torn letter in the pew and walked out the door. I was twenty-six when I opened the letter. I was twenty-seven when I was able to read it. It told a story of two scared kids, and where one had been and what he had done. It wasn't a happy tale.

I was thirty-five when I received word that the woman who bore me had died. I looked at my son, who delivered the news to me while looking at social media. He didn't know. It wasn't worth him knowing. When I was thirty-eight, I thought I was going to lose my husband to anything but death. I was Forty

when I realized he thought the same thing. When I was Forty-one, I was able to put those fears aside. I hope he was too.

Now I'm sixty-three. I am sick, and I won't get any better. My son weeps for me; I wish he wouldn't. When I was sixty-one and actually lost my husband to death, I haven't dreaded this part of life. My son promised he would come say goodbye in the morning; he doesn't know I won't be here. I want to, but I can't. I wrote him a letter at sixty-two, a couple months ago, just in case. Now I just wait.

The same stranger with the familiar face walks through the hospice door. He just walked in like he was leaving the gates of heaven just for me. He is still wearing mud-caked shoes and a pure white shirt. He has grey hair now, and a smile. He comes and sits down next to me in my final moments. He squeezes my hand, for the first time being there for me. I was not alone as I let go of my last breath.

Same Old Lines

Celeste Baker

You were a cliffhanger in my story.
Every laugh, touch, kiss of the cheek—
words constructing sentences leaving
me waiting.
But for what?
You are in too many pages,
with no plot.
I get tired reading the same old lines and
begin to wonder why
I wrote you in at all.

Sense of Home

Cara Sparks

Where is home?
Is it the place itself?
The streets and power lines?
The walls, windows, doors?
Is it those you love?
The friends and families,
The groups you've built?
If it's those you love,
Where is home when they're gone?
When everyone has left,
Where does that leave you?
Are you to wander
Looking for people
That remind you of those
You've loved and lost?
Are you to stay
In the physical place
Surrounded by memories
Of echoing laughter and smiles?
Are you to seek them out
In the dark, forgotten corners
Of the city you once called home?
When everyone is lost
And your foundation is left crumbling
Where are you to turn?
What are you to do
When you lose your sense of home?

The Perfect Morning

Almeda Christensen

The acrid smell of thick cotton hung in his closet. He called it "musty." A suit, as gray as the smell, swayed on a hanger inside.

"That bride is musty, too," he chuckled to his red-coated bloodhound. Otis "Harrumphed" his customary laughter at the joke, and settled down beside EJ for a nap.

"Wish I could join you," EJ said. He didn't mind taking the suit out for an occasional trip to church, when he wanted to impress the widow Jamison. He thought of the heavy weight of social obligation in the springtime, and how hot he would be in the mid-morning sun. He preferred anything to what he was about to do: gardening, trash picking, doing the hula at the Veterans' Ball. Even hearing Preacher Simmons talk about his gout was better than putting on this suit and watching his best friend Larry march to his demise, pretending he doesn't want to run, pretending that he can handle any bombs that would detonate after the honeymoon. Larry was like that during the war, running headlong into battle and pretending he liked it. EJ knew the truth.

"He's just as neutered as you, old boy," EJ said. Otis's feet twitched in response.

Sweat was trickling into EJ's boxers. He stood stoically beside his best friend, and tried not to swat the fly that had landed on his upper lip. It made him sneeze. Larry wiped his forehead.

"Where is that woman?" He asked EJ.

"Damned if I know!"

"A-hem..." said Jessie, the daughter of the bride. "Mom sent me a text to show you."

Larry took the phone and held his reading glasses on the tip of his nose.

"Larry—"

"Don't read it out loud!" EJ hissed out of the corner of his mouth. "You have zero tact—"

"—I have gone to Cancun without you," Larry continued, ignoring EJ. "I am taking the honeymoon money and not coming back. I just don't love you anymore, and I can't see myself listening to your boring war stories for the rest of my life. Love, Bernice. P.S. Call me. "

Larry gave the phone back to Jessie, and with his face pinched, put his head in his hands. EJ put an arm around Larry's shaking shoulders.

"It's okay, buddy. She was old, and saggy, and you wouldn't have had much fun with her."

Larry stopped shaking, and looked up with arms outstretched.

"Praise Jesus! My prayers have been answered!" Larry hollered to the sky.

Simple Things

Cameron Turnbull

You may not even like poetry,
So this probably won't matter.
Because if my words could win your love,
I'd already be with you.

There's a lot I can't give you, but
what I can give you are the
simple things.
Simple things that carry more weight
than you may think.

A late night drive through the city.
The bright colors of neon signs
and their reflections off mirrored buildings
illuminate this oasis of beauty
surrounded by the black of night.
A musician's song fades in and out as we pass by.
This is our night on the town.

I know a place
where we can watch the planes take off,
whisking travelers away to exotic places.
You can rest your head on my shoulder and kick your
shoes off.
Time doesn't exist here.
Only you, me,
and the night.
We have no place to be
and nobody looking for us.
Words are not needed.

The distant plane engines
and the rain on the car
and the slow song on the radio
speak for us both.

During the day, you and I are best of friends.
At night, we are more.
We look different in the orange glow
of a streetlight.
We feel different.
The moonlight makes us braver,
and with no sun in the sky we are in a different world
where time doesn't flow,
and yet it passes so quickly.
We can't change that, but that's okay.
Because if you'll be mine,
we can do this again tomorrow night,
and the next,
and the next...

149th street to the Hudson River

Leslie Castillo

First, you have to go through four blocks all the way to the 3rd Avenue hub, which lives up to its name. The hub is always noisy, there are people talking, cars honking, and sirens wailing at 5a.m. Avoid all the cracks and trash that litter the sidewalks then dodge everyone who is your way. This is dubbed the "four blocks of bullshit" because really, it's just B.S. All of this is inaugurated by a son of bitch 5a.m. car alarm, that is blaring and the owner still hasn't shut it off yet. The sun rises at 6a.m. or 6:10a.m., depending on how the weather is that particular morning. Between cloudy gray days or sunny/partially cloudy days, there is never a full day where it is completely cloudless, and you just see the blue sky. It's that longing to feel at ease, where you could find peace, so the only place to go is on riverside.

Once you have gotten to the station that is 3rd Avenue-149th street: Now, now, let's not get all damned confused with 149th St-Grand Concourse. There is a huge difference between those two. For instance, the Grand Concourse is far closer to Yankee stadium/161 than 3rd avenue is.

The hub is closer to the city. It's centered that way to have an easier access to the next three boroughs. Next, head downstairs but make sure that you are on the right side so you don't end up somewhere deep in uptown Bronx near Wakefield or Dyre Avenue when you had every intention of going to Queens or Manhattan. Go down and either refill your metrocard, or whatever, or get a new one. Just have one handy. Seriously, how else are you going to get to where you're going? By car? Pfft, that is totally overrated for several reasons including not getting into atrocious traffic between lower and upper Manhattan. People will literally throw themselves at your car. They don't care. Go ahead run them over. It'll be blamed on you regardless. Then

by bus? Possibly, but you can't get everywhere since there isn't a bus stop on every street, ya no?

Following that, pick a train, any train, as long as it's not during planned work hours or weekend hours. Those times have to be picked with a certain finesse; you will be so screwed if you don't know what's going down. It's either the 2 train or the 5 train. If you're going straight to Manhattan, west side, the 2 is your best bet. The 5 goes to Manhattan too but it's the east side.

So, you decided to go to Battery Park near the 9/11 memorial because taking the 5 to Bowling Green isn't exactly what you want. You want all of the Hudson River, nothing more nothing less. The turnstiles turn like the tide and the machines beep incessantly as cards are being swiped. As you board, you gotta look down even if there isn't a big gap between the train and the platform. Your mom decided to join you, she hasn't seen you in a good bit. She'll spend all the time witvh you that she gets. She asks which one is the train. You tell her it's the 2 train that's headed to Flatbush Avenue/Brooklyn College. The seats are worn down. You try to enjoy the ride this time, even if you have done this a thousand times before. This is a moment that is different.

"Go ahead sit," your mother says. She finds a seat almost towards the end of the train.

"Where?" You try to follow her while balancing your phone that's in your hand. You talk about everything and nothing. You tell her about your roommate problems about how you're handling your new social life. How all your friends are, including the ones that are still here. She talks about your dad's business, and how it's still wearing him down. You both talk about the four- year- old, nervous, English bulldog that you left in her care. You talk about your abuela, how she is improving day by day. The train rattles, it chugs, a ba-boomp, ba-boomp boomp, rhythmic like a heartbeat. From 149 to Fulton street is about 15 stops. The same female voice announces the stops and the possible transfers. The sliding doors click, they crackle: a male voice tells you to "stand clear of the closing doors please."

It's never quite like this. Everyone has their headphones in

with the exception of a few who come in together and talk. You two stay quiet and you tell her that the ankle brace you have on hurts. Apparently, you have the same foot problems as she does. It's always crowded at 72nd. This isn't the 6-7a.m. rush, this is the mid morning rush. It's the 9a.m. workers, who don't have to go in that early. Luckily, they disperse at 42nd street, which is one stop away. Fifteen stops later on Fulton, you would have to walk all the way to the end of the platform, however, you can't go towards the South Street Seaport, you have go towards to all the signs with the memorial plastered on them. You know this now, after the fact, because she asked a security guard at the mall about the escalators that come up. Trying to find a faster way to get here, being the typical New Yorker she is, always trying to save time. But, then there is also Park Place that you can stop at, but that is a longer walk, since it's above ground. Stopping at Fulton will lead you underground to the Brookfield Place Mall directly above it.

At Park Place, someone dropped a raw egg on the floor, which was formally dubbed "Abstract Egg Art"; makes you wonder who was carrying eggs to their home at this stop. She huffs playfully that walking up, feels like twenty steps. You tease her, calling her a viejita, an old woman. You exit, and walk all the way down the same block to the white bird wings of the Oculus. The Oculus looms over Vesey street, near the One Twin Tower that stands tall, the one half of the towers. As you walk, you see the names etched into the dark slab of marble. Where water falls with a loud shhhhh, and there are faded ribbons or flowers that have died, or are sun dried. There are trees lines up all round with the people who are probably tourists coming to see the site that actually made global history. You have to walk all the way down to the street, where you will be greeted with glass windows, a building with chrome and marble on the high end shops that surround it. The building itself screams "sophistication" with its various shades of gray and a creamy beige with brown. Certainly without the help the Equinox gym in view. Cross the streets and head into the mall. Go around Burberry so you don't have to climb up three flights just to

come back down. Head towards the doors, past the scattered seats and what appears to be actual palm trees. That's where the longer walk starts.

It's the North Cove marina where a bunch of boats are docked. That's where you can feel the Hudson breeze, but you smell the saltiness, which should be odd, especially for a river. It's likely because the Atlantic Ocean flows into into it. There's outdoor seating and there is a little shop near that section called Tartinery. Someone is sweeping out overflowing water from a little water fountain with a broom. You can see the skyline of the city of all the buildings across the river. There are round bricks that are laid out and damp. The further you walk, the further you're from Brookfield and outdoor restaurants and closer to the Jewish Heritage Museum. This is a long walk because even though it's a view on the riverside, the journey feels never-ending. You're timing yourself because she has to drop you off at the airport in an hour. She takes it in and is in awe. She hasn't been in this area since she was young, scrappy, and working I.T. jobs around Tribeca, mostly on Maiden Lane/Wall Street.

There are benches and the amount of people diminish, but there are still people running. Dogs are everywhere, and every sound and bustle of the mall fades out like movie soundtrack after the credits. The only sounds that are heard are the honking of the boats and the swish, swish of the water. You pass all these restaurants and you see more children. You approach a small pair of stairs then the equally squished walk way that wraps around. You also see wooden poles and hanging lights. Pass more trees, and on the side, it's bushes, with its hidden buildings behind them. Nothing worth noticing. The walkway leads up more to the river, a broad view of the river, with its various hues of blue. It's an open view, it makes the city look vast and friendly. Less harsh, and less cluttered than it normally does. You two giggle at the men working there, fucking up the serenity of the place. All of it is wooden; the benches, the planks that hold it together. They don't look as weathered as they feel sometimes. But the Hudson sways, sashays into the wood and into other boats, then docks. They rip like leg muscles that

traveled too far to get here... just to clear the thoughts that you've been trying to avoid for a while now.

The Man with One Good Hat

Megan Rosenthal

I tugged my hat down further to shield my eyes from the curtain of rainfall that cloaked the assembly in thick sheets. It was my one good hat. A beret. A shame it had to be sodden by the sorrows of death, present as the casket was lowered into the damp ground. Though, I guessed the hat had already been marked by grief. I wore this hat only once before, at her wedding. Due to the similar chunk lead in my heart, I deemed it suitable to wear to her funeral, as well.

That day, I had lifted my hand to the brim, using my fingers as a canopy to filter the sunlight that soaked the happy couple in a life anew. Now, alongside the sleek, black, timbers that hid her lifeless body, I realized that the words "I do" had marked the beginning of the end. The vows I watched the woman I love whisper marked a sentence for life, until death did they part.

Both days ended the same. I removed my hat, wrung it between my hands, and resisted the urge to use it to blot my prickling eyes. Instead, I stuffed it into my pants pocket to free my hands to embrace my brother, standing next to me. The tears in his eyes this time were not from happiness.

"I'll always love her," he choked.

Me too, I wished to scream, but instead I patted his back. "She was a good wife to you."

Go to Sleep

Nicole Kropf

Reality bludgeons its way;
forces one awake
to all hearts dismay,
it exposes our dreams as fake

We trudge ahead on dismal paths,
craving to go back;
back to the realm of starlit muse
we would if we could so choose

Down the troden road we plod,
we subsist in such drudgery
we are introduced to life; he is a sod
for life is such misery

From whence we were forced to open our eyes
We saw life and we were traumatized
If only we could go back to where that starlight resides
We would see life with technicolor eyes

Life isn't as bad as all that though
For nature's hues don't always fall flat, so
Look beyond what the eyes can see
And we will return to the realm of fantasy

The Gardener

Julia Debski

She pulled the blooms
up with the weeds, shook the earth free
from the long grey strangling roots.
All had to go, good and bad, nothing
could stay for the new season.

The garden had become a mess.
Tangled Damask rose bushes left to run wild,
like sticky hands grabbing at girls' skirts
as they walk past in the park.
The petals still soft, the scent still sweet
but too far gone to navigate safely.
They stand ready to claw at
anyone who comes too close.

Forget-me-nots indeed forgotten
under a heavy blanket of vines.
Each plant was buried with a portion
of her heart, and now every green
she unearthed included a tug
between ribs three and four.
She spent the day in the dirt,
back aching, knees bruising, face red,
wiped her hands on thread thin jeans,
muddy streaks posed as war paint across
both sun-kissed cheeks.

Hellfire Burns Cold

Natalie Murphy

It was 4:04am where Vera lay in a hotel bed in St. Petersburg. But, it didn't matter what time it was and it didn't matter where she was because she was Vera, and she was dying, and that was what mattered. That was the only thing that mattered.

Dmitri had fallen asleep flat on his back, his bony chest rising and falling like a fleshy, pulsing birdcage. And Vera thought that she preferred him with his eyes closed, nothing to stare at. Dmitri's eyes needed a warning, like the sun. If you looked at them too long, you'd probably hurt yourself. Not by scorching your eyes blind, but by realizing that there was nothing behind Dmitri's eyes.

He was the kind of man that smiled for no reason, just with the corners of his mouth, and all too often. There was something predatory about it. Her schoolmates used to do it too, the ones she never liked to talk to. But, Dmitri didn't like talking, so she could just lay beside him and not look at his dead eyes or slightly lifted mouth and pretend the oxytocin rushing through her was the real thing.

Like taking vitamins, she thought.

Vera was dying, and it was because she was human, and there was no other reason for it than that. It wasn't an illness that was causing her to die. It was an illness that she had to die at all.

Most people could leave death in the back of their minds as something to worry about on sleepless nights, but Vera saw death as though it was pressed against her nose. Death for Vera was as close as it would be for a IV-d, wasted patient in a hospital, waiting to ferment.

If dying was an illness, whiskey was the treatment. But, it was a treatment like an SSRI. If you used it right, it was a

good fix. If you were unlucky you'd end up killing yourself.

Recklessly crashing through life was the general prescription Vera took. But, she inevitably circled back to the gray of every evening, staring in her mirror at her dried out hair and the flakes of makeup on her face, wondering why she ever did the things she did. Why she flirted with death when she was so afraid of it. Why she slept with Dmitri even though she didn't want to.

She remembered meeting him first, in a first edition book shop, and he looked as dilapidated and beautiful as the goddamn copies of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy novels shelved above his head. When she'd taken The Death of Ivan Ilyich off the shelf, he'd scoffed under his breath, and she could smell it immediately, the tobacco.

"Depressing," he'd murmured.

"Fitting when you're depressed," she'd replied.

He'd liked that.

She rose from the bed, not minding her noise for the sake of Dmitri's sleep. He stirred for a moment, looked at her from a slit, dead eye and then promptly closed it. It was snowing outside.

She snatched the blanket off the end of the bed, threw it over her shoulders like a cape, and she unlatched the balcony door. The wind came in with a brilliance, pushing her into a stumble, kissing her body with tiny particles of ice. She smiled.

"Stupid girl," Dmitri mumbled. "Close the fucking door."

She wasn't stupid. He knew that, and she knew that. She was so smart that she was always sad, and that could make you do more stupid things than any low IQ ever could.

She stepped her bare feet onto the iced balcony floor.

"You're going to kill yourself with that chill," he called from inside.

She'd been able to block out the cold since she was a child. She would register the feeling in her brain, the bite at her skin and the numbing of her nerves and she would tell herself that it was simply a sensation, and it would go away. It wasn't hard to do. She focused in on it now, the cold rising up through

the soles of her feet, and she saw this as merely a feeling, and so it died.

"You think so?" she called back.

The building across the street was unevenly lit. Vera imagined that through those dim windows someone watched her standing there, bare in the cold, a naked statue peered at from the eyes of the passerby. On the stage of the balcony, she was art.

"For fuck's sake, Vera," Dmitri grumbled, getting out of the bed, not stopping to clothe himself. He grabbed her by the hand, but she pulled it back immediately.

"You think I could die if I stayed out here?"

He blinked. "Yes."

He kissed her squarely on the mouth then, quick and hard like he didn't mean it, and pulled her by the waist.

"I think I could survive," she said.

He was shivering under the thin blanket of his bare flesh. "Come inside, Vera."

The way he said it, she couldn't ignore it. It was one of those rare moments that Dmitri actually sounded like a person. She followed him inside the room, and they laid themselves on the hotel bed once again. Under the sheets with the heat of Dmitri's breath rolling off her face, she opened her mouth, and a string of words came out before she could stop it.

"I don't like doing this," she said. It had solidified into words before it could fully solidify in her head. She didn't have to finish it. It hung in the air like she had. Like she'd said "I don't like watching you get high while you sit at the edge of the bed like I'm not supposed to notice. I don't like kissing the rough edges of your stubble and pretending that it's affection. I don't like drinking myself to death beside you, knowing that the alcohol has more of an effect on me than it does on you. I don't like lying underneath you with my skull hitting the headboard of the bed, and you staring at me with your dead eyes. I don't like you." And as soon as she thought she'd dropped a lead wall between the two of them, Dmitri replied:

"I don't either."

And then it was different. It wasn't Vera afraid of death, Vera bouncing on a bed with her soul getting crushed between her legs, Vera choking on a plastic water bottle filled with vodka. It was Vera in a bed with man who meant nothing to her, and Vera in a bed with a man who she meant nothing to. She was the moment where the boredom stopped in a sickly silence and some semblance of Interesting emerged grossly pale and dripping in decay. She was the entertainment, the distraction to wave in front of the inevitable void. She was Interesting. She was sad and she was destructive and she always smelled like alcohol and she read Tolstoy and she was so goddamned Interesting.

She imagined him wincing about her like she'd winced about him. She imagined him drinking to forget what he'd done with her. And it was different. Oh dear nonexistent god, it was different.

"I really never have." He said that quietly. His eyes weren't dead anymore.

"I haven't either," she said. And she could feel her throat closing up and her hands starting to shake.

Because Dmitri didn't get to be the one with the unresolved issues floating around his head, landing in a bed with an inconsequential piece of human being because he couldn't stand to be alone with his thoughts. That was Vera's thing. That was Vera's life.

"You're shivering," he said, like he knew it wasn't from the cold.

Vera jolted upright, hung her legs over the side of the bed. She studied the tops of her feet, the blue veins that protruded in little hills over her tendons. This body never felt like hers when she felt things. Good, bad, anything. And she was feeling again, and she was strapped into this vessel until it would end. Because this wasn't the cold. It didn't bite her from the outside in. It seeped from the inside out.

"I've never really liked you," she said.

"I've felt the same," he replied, matter-of-factly.

Vera couldn't be someone who someone put up with. The rest of the world was allowed to be disliked, the rest of the

world could be rejected, the rest of the world deserved to die, but not Vera, not Vera.

Vera couldn't be the one who wasn't loved. Vera couldn't be the one someone swallowed down wincing. Vera couldn't be the one who would feel pain and illness and death. It was always someone else. It was always just "sad news" she'd hear about. About someone sick, or hurtin,g or dying that was never her.

"I think I'm going to go," he said.

"Wh–wh–huh?" she blubbered, twisting around.

He was already stumbling back into his jeans. "I'm going to call a taxi. I think I want to go."

"That's ok," she said even though it wasn't. She was the one who was supposed to leave first. She always left first.

It was then that she realized it felt kind of good to be so dissatisfied, searching in the corners of hotel bathrooms and the bottom of whiskey bottles for happiness, or for anything. It felt liberating to not know which way she was going enough that she'd end up in a hotel bed with Dmitri once a week like it was an appointment.

But, now she sat on the bed, her torso scrunched over the arc of her spine, breasts folding into stomach folding into thighs. And she was filled with this sudden feeling of unrelenting inadequacy. If someone like Dmitri couldn't put up with her, who would?

Was it better that Dmitri couldn't put up with her? Did that mean that other, better people would?

But, she couldn't delude herself. She was the same dead-faced misanthropic pile of strung out nerves and liver cirrhosis as him. And they'd been mirroring each other for months.

Vera was not the protagonist of the world's story. She fit into the background of everyone else's life as that skinny girl who was so afraid of death she'd keep running straight towards it. And to Dmitri, she'd been a pair of legs to open. And to this hotel's owner, she'd been a weekly earning of 5000 rubles. And to the passerby outside, she was art.

But to herself, she was still just Vera. Very human. Very much still dying.

She looked to the outside, where the snow was falling and making the nighttime look much brighter than it should have been. The lingering smell of Dmitri and his cigarette ash and his over-saturated cologne suffocated Vera in such a way that she sprung off the bed and stepped outside once again.

There, she sat on the frozen concrete, pulling her knees to her chest. She focused as she always did, and she did not feel the cold.

She could hear the taxi door shut outside as Dmitri got in and rode off into the next distraction. Between the legs of whoever else would kill his boredom. And she named it as just as sound, and so it was gone.

Then she lay on her side, her arm as a pillow, curled up with her skin glued to the ground. And she slept.

She awoke the next morning, saliva frozen to her face, her feet and hands completely numb. Her skin burned red from ice, and it reminded her of Dante's Inferno, of a hell that was frozen over, and she thought that maybe she could be the protagonist of that story. One where she just kept burning and never died.

But she was still Vera, and she was still dying, and none of it really mattered.

watered-down

Megan Rosenthal

we live like water,
desperation drowning
behind dry eyes,
drinking cheap wine
from plastic cups.

promises, lies, flow
from full mouths,
sending currents
crashing against
the rock formation
of our hearts,
but we dam
the connection
before the wall
can erode away.

we kiss,
soaking another's
tongue and suck
the last drop of sweet
rain from their bottom
lip, trying to quench
the desert in the back
of our own throats.

we say we love,
lying on top
of sand, underneath
a pure moon.

the sea beyond sips
the breath we swore
we'd never let out,
swelling to meet
the tips of our feet,
never quite touching.

Light and Darkness

Elisabeth King

A bridesmaid, decorated in her rose-colored dress, lifted the back of Alexandra's veil, and watched in awe as its crisp, ivory fabric fell to the ground. I stood with my arms crossed and my right shoulder leaned up against the doorway. Did she know that I was here? She turned to face me, seemingly surprised that I had decided to attend. Behind the caked concealer you could see the red puffiness under her bottom eye lashes. Her once shimmering, brown eyes were concealing a darkness. Had she been crying last night? It was not hard to tell she had been fighting with herself. Her emotions always did seem to get the best of her. Her hardened stare pierced into my heart, as if she was begging me to stop all this madness. I made my choice, and I regretted it every day. How could I let her go? How could I manage to let her slip from my grasp? There were at least twelve women in the room, reminding her of exactly how fast she should walk, and checking to make sure she remembered to put on a second coat of lipstick, but even so, her gaze did not stray from mine. I began to remember the days when we would sit in her living room. She would slowly turn my face to hers, those eyes placing me in some sort of trance. She would kiss my hand and promise me that she would never leave my side. I made no such promise, I couldn't, at the time. I thought what I was doing was for her own good, little did I know I was tearing her heart to pieces and leaving her to clean up the mess. The love of my life was about to begin her decent down the aisle into another man's arms. I had no time to say anything before she was rushed out of the parlor and to the main doors of the sanctuary. I held my place and waited for her to look in my direction. Sure enough, as soon as she was given the okay to walk, she turned and looked at me. How could I expect her

to run back into my arms and forgive me? It was clearly too late. She nodded her head and gave in to the commands of her coordinator. I waited in the lobby of the church, listening to the sounds of my shoes against the ceramic tile as I paced back and forth. I couldn't take this pain any longer. It was then that I looked down and noticed two letters carved into one of the tiles. I bent down and traced my finger along the rigid edges, remembering the afternoon we snuck out of Sunday school with a pair of scissors to permanently mark our love. I had made my decision. I pushed open the double doors to the sanctuary, and when they were fully opened, I found her already standing in front of me. Her fiancé stood at the end of the aisle, yelling for her to come back, but he made the same mistake that I once had: he did not go after her. After a moment, she laced her fingers into mine and smiled, her eyes once again filled with light, the darkness defeated in my own reflection.

Glitter Gold

Connor Nagaki

My fingers are painted Glitter Gold.
Not because I'm
fabulous
But because I'm tired
Of hiding who I am.
Of fear dragging its callous hands
Around my throat,
Choking any gasp of bravery
Out of my lungs.

And I don't need a deep voice
Because I finally reached deeper
To pull out the small boy
Crouched in the corner,
Afraid to be happy
To be who he is,
To be what God made him.

Because He doesn't hate my pride.
Heaven handmade it,
Formed like the very clay
Used to make Adam.
It screams like the shepherd:
"I am home. Come join me."
All the merit lies in their self-love.

Because I stared into mirrors
To find a different truth.
A truth that didn't tell me
That I was different.

A truth that saved me from
The tears of my mother.
And protected me from
The sadness of my father.

And if I could save them
One second of staring into mirrors
One moment of despising how they love,
Then my persecution means the world.
Then the pain of today will
Stay in today.

Because My lips will touch another boy's
And if mine don't,
Whose will?
If I'm not gay,
Then who will be gay?
If I'm not proud,
Then who will be proud?
If I'm not happy,
Then who will be happy?
If I don't paint my nails,
who will.

The Power of a Purse

Almeda Christensen

I wanted to be my mother, back when I was eight years old. She was grown up. Strong. Powerful. She had a purse.

She used to give me her old purses she didn't use anymore, worn thin and damaged. She gave me old checkbooks and pens and change, so that I could be a "real person," which is what I had insisted on. I wanted to carry my purse with me to school, but she didn't permit me.

What she didn't understand was that I needed that purse, to improve my social standing in the classroom. I was not at all popular, with my red hair, glasses the size of my face, and boyish muscles. I was often mistaken for a boy. The girls were uncomfortable with me and the boys would get tired of me and tell me to go away, once they realized I couldn't run quite as fast or throw a ball quite as hard as they could. (I was also small for my age.) One boy would even wait for me at a certain corner on my route home, the route that my dad had carefully laid out for me as "safe," and the one for which I would get in trouble if I strayed, and that boy would punch me in my face as I walked home. It didn't occur to me to cross the street because I was more afraid of what my dad would do if I altered the route even just that little bit, but then, Jason probably would have just crossed the street to catch up with me.

I thought, "If I had a purse, I could be a real person and then the girls would talk to me, and Jason would leave me alone." They would have to see how grown up and strong and interesting I was, because I would have something interesting and grown up resting on my shoulder. So, I begged my mother for a week to let me take a purse to school, and she finally relented.

I picked out a navy purse. It looked sort of boxy, and I think it had white trim that was peeling off. All I carried was change,

pennies my grandmother had given me. That purse was heavy with probably over six hundred pennies in it. I didn't want to bring anything else, because playing with pennies brought me comfort.

I went to school, and none of the girls spoke to me. I followed them. "I have a purse."

They ignored me. I was still the redhead with glasses as big as my face, and I still had boyish muscles. Except now I had a purse full of change that was getting heavier, a purse that I didn't want to put down because, duh, I had money and it might have been stolen. Correction: it would have been stolen, because that's just what happened to unattended bags in Upstate New York back in the 1970s.

The day went the same as every other day, and I was a little disappointed that I hadn't become famous or popular. I was reflecting on this disappointment and forgot all about my reluctant ritual of being punched at the corner where the convenience store sat. Out popped Jason, hands on hips.

"I can punch you," he said. It was the same line he used every day.

"Not now, Jason. Go away."

"You think your stupid purse is cool? You think your stooooooooopid little purse is-"

I swung my purse full of change, twirling Wonder-Woman-style, until I got enough momentum to knock Jason Sperry flat. While he was scrambling on the cracked sidewalk, I beat him mercilessly, copper spraying everywhere, until the purse got lighter. Jason ran home, crying. I picked up most of the pennies and walked home. I woke up the next day happier. I was full of extra strength. I felt I didn't need a purse anymore.

I watched the girls growing up alongside me, the ones that didn't like me, the girls that didn't care about my purse, or any purse. At about the age that we entered Middle School, I watched them change almost overnight- they started going nuts over purses and bags. They had to be made by a certain brand name. They fought if one girl bought a purse that was the same color as another girl's. (The color issue was a really big deal for

them, for some reason. They would sometimes get into fist fights over it, with accusations of who was copying whom. It didn't make any sense to me- I mean, who does that? And why?) The girl who had the most expensive, most unique, "latest-fashion" purse was the unspoken winner: she was deemed not only the most popular, but the most powerful, socially. I didn't care enough to keep up with any of the "exclusive designers." In fact, I spent the next twenty years avoiding carrying a purse at all. It got in my way.

Sometimes it gets better as you get older and the bullying stops, but sometimes, as in my case, the bullies get bigger and dumber. I want my power back, now that I am a real person, now that my glasses aren't so big, now that I have girlish muscles, now that I've been getting more wired, more fragmented, more distressed, and more exhausted. I want a purse, and this time, I want it to be equipped with more than what I had to work with in the second grade. I want it to be an entertainment system and weapon, all-in-one.

In my new, grown up purse, I want a realistic-looking bat, to remind me of the times I relax by lying down on the ground and look at the bats at dusk. I want a realistic-looking skull, to remind me of that wicked awesome oak tree on the elementary-school playground that looked like it had a skull on it, with a branch growing out of the right eye. (It was a good tree to sit under, when the playground got to be too much for me to handle.) It needs to be a small skull, with a latch on it so that I can open it up and store my medicines inside of it. I think I might also want a realistic-looking extra body part thrown in there, because if someone is going through my purse, then they shouldn't be, and I want them to be scared and disgusted and I want them to throw up.

Then I would have the more normal things found in a purse: a wallet, snacks, tissues, a mirror, hand sanitizer, epi-pens. But then I want fun stuff, like incriminating Polaroids of myself or someone famous, like former governor Pat McRory French kissing another man. That would bring me a lot of joy. I want to have a bubble-necklace, to blow spontaneous bubbles and then

hide the wand, just to confuse people. I want a small bag of the multi-faceted dice, so I can write down options when I am stuck on a problem, number them, and then roll the dice and have it make the decision for me. I want a mini-Magic-Eight-Ball, to answer life's burning questions. I want that cool flashlight that dad just got me that can flash a red strobe for forty hours, Fourth of July Sparklers, and a lighter so I can have spontaneous parties when the mood strikes. If I added body glitter, confetti, and grape-flavored warming lube, well, the confetti would stick to the lube, but the party would be a lot more fun.

I no longer have a use for pantyliners, but I still have a big box of them, so I will use them to write messages to stick onto on people's doors, if they happen to be out of the office. Nothing fancy, "Mimi was here," will work. I want multi-colored pens to write juicy story ideas on my upper thigh, because I know I will run out of room on my left hand. Or, I can just get a mini-notebook, and use the colored pens for temporary tattoos. I want an eye mask and ear plugs so I can take spur-of-the-moment naps. And of course, I will add roughly six hundred pennies, so that I can twirl like Wonder Woman again if anyone tries to pull another "Jason Sperry" on me.

The Spring Begins in the Gray Eyes of a Cynic

Natalie Murphy

You are the new
Spring, Skinny
Pretty Man, too
stretched out and strung out,

with smiles so
brief I've barely seen
the cigarette rust
on your teeth. I could bury

myself in the hollow
of your chest
and suffocate on smoke
and drugs

and the same cologne
you've been wearing
for the past two years.
I am dead

until you touch me. Winter,
with my mind hardened like
dried roses, washed out
and delicate enough to

break. And then you kiss me,
and I am a nymphet with white
socks on my ankles, bursting
ripe fruit between the webs

of my fingers and turning them
sticky-sweet. Let me be
your limp doll, lying
stained in a bed

of daffodils, my wrists
too dainty
to be held. Let the sun
turn my eyes

gold and let the damp
ground turn my body
soft, and my affection
will throb

like the gap between two milk
incisors: red, hollow,
and sore with the pain
of growth.

Front Porch Wishes

Danielle Price

A wish,
for longer days
and quiet moments.
For the tides to stop
and wait to breathe
just a hour longer.

A wish,
For the contentment
that spills from your lips,
Telling me over and over
"you are beautiful"
even as I reply, "no"

A wish,
For the taste
of bourbon on the rocks
swirled in a glass.
Of coffee blackened
By rich beans with no cream.

A wish,
For books that never end.
When the characters are real
And dancing through space.
Becoming friends
In a tainted reality.

The Eclipse is Coming

Megan Rosenthal

August 21st, 2017, 10:12 a.m.

Grace took one hand off the steering wheel to rub at her tired eyes. She had been up since 5:30 that morning, so that she would pull into the university parking lot by 6:30 and would have time to fill her coffee and sit in her office at precisely 6:53, ready to work at 7:00. Although the students had not yet begun classes for the year, the young professor still felt like she had to make sure her World History syllabus was set to go for the upcoming week, regardless of the total solar eclipse set to play out later that day, alongside her own mother's neighborhood eclipse viewing party.

The white stripes on the highway blurred once again, then snapped back into focus with three sharp blinks of Grace's eyes. She reached down to the cup holder to sip from her cooling coffee, three creams and three sugars. When she put the monogramed travel mug back in its place, her focus wavered from the road just long enough to miss the sudden flash of red brake lights.

"Oh my god !" Grace cried aloud and slammed the brake on the floorboard of her husband's BMW. The antilock brake jostled the front end, whipping Grace's chest against the sudden restraint of her seatbelt, then throwing her back against the seat with a yelp at the abrupt halt. Grace gasped for breath as she rose to peer up over the steering wheel; she thanked the Lord when she saw room between the shiny hood and the SUV in front of her.

Horns blared in all directions. There were shouts from outside of the cluster of cars that had suddenly piled up. Grace closed her eyes and willed her breath to quiet her rioting heart, trying to break out of her ribcage prison.

She cracked her eye lids once her breathing had come down off its mad rush and looked around at the scene in front of her, trying to figure out what caused the sudden back up. People were still yelling, some getting out of their cars, waving their hands exuberantly, while others remained in their seats with the windows rolled down, leaning out of the driver's seat, yelling profanities wrapped around a single question: what was going on?

Grace thought it best to get out and inspect the commotion for herself, for no one else seemed to be making any progress in moving the standstill traffic. She slid the car in park and took the key out of the ignition. Her pink high heels stumbled a bit coming out of the door, but her steps even as she locked the car and strode across the paved highway, past the rows of cars that were piled up in front of hers.

At the head of the traffic line, Grace stopped dead in her tracks, her right hand flying to her lips but her voice escaped through her shaking fingers as a muffled cry.

There was a body in the road.

Cars had stopped at length behind it and ahead so that it lay in a ritualistic manner at the center of the clearing. It was lying face down, limbs bent at odd angles and stretched unnaturally across the white center line of the highway. The figure looked to be male by the broadness of his shoulders clad in a faded red cotton shirt bunched up so that it exposed soft, pale skin marred by several scrapes encrusted with bits of gravel, blood, and torn flesh.

Grace swayed.

"Ma'am, you're going to have to step back to your car."

The words were barely registering as Grace used every ounce of her rational mind to make sense of the image in front of her. Why was there was a body in the road?

Grace's legs wobbled before she found herself backing away from the scene until her calves touched the cool metal of the guardrail on the highway. She sat down, lips quivering, stomach rolling, eyes still locked on the body that now had a cluster of men surrounding it, poking, prodding, pushing.

Get up.

"As if we didn't already know that the fucking eclipse was coming," a voice grumbled from beside Grace.

She peeled her eyes away from the commotion long enough to notice a hunched man sitting beside her on the guard rail, trucker hat sitting off center of his head. When did he get here?

"You think... you think the eclipse had something to do with this?" Grace asked.

The man shrugged. "Why shouldn't it? It's a good reason to pick today to go play in traffic. Bastard. Fucking up everyone's day now."

Sirens blared in the near distance while Grace shuddered at the anger behind the man's response. Was he really angry at the inconvenience this death was posing to his day?

Anger. The text of Grace's newly formed syllabus danced in her head. The ancient Greeks had believed that a solar eclipse was a sign of angry gods. An evil omen, bringing destruction, disasters, and...

Death. Often the death of a king back in ancient superstition, but one could never be too careful about the threats the supernatural phenomenon might impose on everyone.

Grace muttered, "I have to go," excusing herself from the scene. She rose, her legs wobbling a bit as she made her way back to her parked car. She had to get home; her mother and her daughter would be expecting her soon. It shouldn't take that long to remove the corpse, should it? Grace shuddered, the image of the poor man's mangled limbs burning in her mind.

She pulled herself back into the driver's seat, locking the doors back in place with a chirping click. Once seated with her seatbelt back across her chest, Grace slid the bar on her phone to unlock it, echoing a similar click, to call her husband. It rang several times before going to voicemail.

"Figures," Grace muttered, letting her phone fall into her lap. She pinched the bridge of her nose, eyes stinging, and waited.

August 21st, 2017, 11:21 a.m.

"Time for refreshments, everyone!" Emmy's grandmother

called as she walked out of her house, balancing a tray on one hand and toting an orange jug in the other.

Emmy leapt up from her hole she had dug in the sandbox, tiny grains spraying like confetti and raining back into the box. "Coming!" she squealed and ran towards the backyard.

All the neighborhood children at the party were running to the picnic tables, where many of their parents and some grandparents were still standing around and talking the way parents seemed to always do. Emmy slid in between her twin friends Luke and Matthew, who were already reaching for the tray of chocolate looking snacks.

"Sunny D's and Moon Pies, in honor of the solar eclipse coming later today," Emmy's grandmother chimed, handing out cups for the orange drink and small packages containing the chocolate cakes.

Emmy tore open the package. "Thanks, Grammie," she managed in between bites.

Her grandmother chuckled. "No problem, sweetheart." With the children fed and content, she went back to her conversation with the neighboring families who had come to support the eclipse viewing party.

Luke nudged Emmy's side. "Where's your mom?"

Emmy looked up at him, chocolate smudged on the corner of her mouth. "She's coming, but she had to go to work. Getting ready for school to start, just like us!"

"Yeah, but she's a teacher," Matthew said, rolling his eyes. "In college. We are going to first grade." Between his slight lisp and the cake in his own mouth, it sounded to Emmy that they were going into fist grade.

"Your dad's not here either," Luke ignored his brother and looked back towards where both of their parents were standing and laughing.

"He said he's working too," Emmy said again, this time without looking up. Her father had left early this morning as well, after dropping her off at Grammie's house down the street. Her father always left early for work, but Emmy hadn't missed that he had started coming back late now too.

August 21st, 2017, 12:16 p.m.

"Father... Forgive me... I'm not going to be very good at this," Chris wrung his hands together from his hunched seat on a pew. "Though, I guess you would know that already... I wouldn't be any good at a sort of confession. I haven't been here much lately... but you would know that too. I-," Chris tried again, but the words burned in the back of his throat. "It's just that, you know, the end of the world is coming with the eclipse and all," the joke fell short with a hollow and raspy chuckle. "And, um, I figured that I should..."

"You should come out sometime," the girl had told me. Lindsay, as she introduced herself when she precociously sat down at my table in the coffee shop near the university campus. "We go to Prohibition every Saturday night, but I'm visiting home in Charleston this weekend so I might catch the club there. Maybe I'd see you?"

I had laughed initially at the thought. "You don't think my two gray hairs would stand out in the crowd?"

A sly smile spread across her face and she shrugged, letting her loose top slide a bit further down her shoulder. "I wouldn't notice if you were behind me."

"I, I need to..."

"I need to go to my office first thing Monday morning," my wife had told me when she came back from work last Friday. "I've got a few things to finish up there."

"That's the day of the solar eclipse, isn't it?" I asked. "You're going to choose to work on the last day of the world as we know it?"

She laughed, a bittersweet sound to my ears, already distant from the kitchen we were sitting in. "Just like you've been telling me, all that is going to happen is that it's going to get a little cloudy, right? The world isn't ending."

That's what Lindsay had told me anyway. "Well in that case," I started. "There's a company function I have to go to this weekend. Out of town, in South Carolina. I-I should be back midday Sunday." I was lying through my teeth but the words

wouldn't stop tripping over one another, each more eager to get out as the lie stacked like Tetris blocks.

"Sounds good, have fun."

Fuck, the trust this woman had in me.

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry." The apology nearly choked Chris to get out.

The club seemed smaller Saturday night than it had ten years ago when I was a senior in college. Two years before I had married, another two before my daughter had been born. She's six now, Emmy is, blonde hair long and fine, not unlike her mothers, and not unlike the hair tied back in Lindsay's pony tail, bobbing as she danced before me.

What was I doing here? I shouldn't be here, but I couldn't leave. I was magnetized, hooked by the vibrations in the club's floor. I barely realized my hands had moved until my fingers found the waistband of her skirt. I tugged her writhing body closer to mine.

"I'm so terribly, terribly sorry," Chris finally managed. The tears that scorched his cold cheeks felt like a sin in their own; he didn't have the right to be shedding them.

Yesterday, Sunday morning, I didn't wake up in my own bed.

"And I guess," Chris sniveled. "I guess it wasn't all a hoax. Today will mark the end after all." His marriage was going to crumble and fall. He didn't deserve it, not anymore. He probably never did. He was going to destroy his family. His daughter. His wife. "I'm so sorry, Grace. I love you."

August 21st, 2017, 2:31 p.m.

"An accident earlier today caused some serious backup along the northbound lane of I77. Now, only hours later, it has been determined that the man identified as Parker King appeared to jump from the median and into the fast lane of highway traffic, causing a pile up of cars and trucks, and ultimately committing a quick suicide. Family, friends, and witnesses are currently being contacted to question their views on this story as we are working to decipher why King might have

made such a choice..."

Fall Out Boy started singing from Z's phone, drowning out the depressing news coverage being streamed from her car. She fumbled to turn down the radio and slide the answer button as she drove back to her place in Charlotte from her twin brother's apartment in Charleston. Click. "Hey Larkin, what's up?"

"Where ya at, sis?" Larkin chirped through the phone.

Z rolled her eyes. "Only about an hour further away from where I left you in your *'zone of totality'* at home."

"Are you watching this? I can't even tell you how cool this is. Who would've thought we would be alive to witness a total solar eclipse?"

"I'm pretty sure the Mesopotamians could've predicted it," Z mumbled as she recalled the title of a reading already published online for her history class set to start next week the university. Professor Grace McCoy sure seemed to be eager for World History this semester with her syllabus ready so early. She must be new to the school, Z thought, I haven't taken any classes from a McCoy yet.

"The whosapotamiwhats?"

"Never mind."

"What does your sky look like?"

Z peeked up through her open sunroof. She had allowed Larkin to convince her to do that much as a witness to history being made. "A little cloudy."

"It's getting really dark here."

"No way, bro," Z didn't think her tone could get any drier, even if she doused the words in an expensive cabernet. "That's so cool."

"Lindsay, don't be a cold-hearted bitch. This is really fucking amazing and you're ruining the vibes."

Z sighed, mostly at her brother's use of her real name. It was one she rarely used and only gave out for special circumstance; it was one he only used when she was actually starting to piss him off. "Sorry, Lark, I'm just trying to get back to get ready for classes next week." And back to the man she

had talked into visiting home with her over the weekend. Chris, she remembered. She couldn't believe it when he had texted her Saturday night asking to meet up for a drink before going to Pro. Z's pattern prevailing, it was a bit believable when that drink turned into two and then five. After they danced for hours on end, it was more than expected that he came home with her that night. Larkin hadn't minded the plus one rule that usually accompanied Z when she crashed at his place. He had seemed too caught up in his own boy trouble to care about or even notice the man trailing behind Z's stumbling figure when they came back in the wee hours of Sunday morning. Z herself didn't even wake to see him slip out of the guest bedroom as the sparkling sun rays stung the window pane. Unfortunately.

"Well I guess I'll let you go then. Camera is all set up so I'm gonna go get some sick shots of this sunshine." His voice was distant as if he had already clicked her on speaker, and Z could hear him tinkering with his tripod probably, making sure that everything was ready to go as soon as the moon slid into position in front of the sun.

"Sounds good, enjoy your nature at its finest."

"You know I will. Love ya, Z," Larkin said.

"You too." The line went dead and the sky darkened to an overcast shade.

The radio filled the silence in a dull hum, "It has just been confirmed by a neighbor to the King residence that last night, Parker King stormed out of his parents' house around 2:30 a.m., presumably after a heated argument as their voices could be heard from next door..."

Z reached to turn off the radio. *Click.*

August 21st, 2017, 3:45 p.m.

Larkin sat glued to the computer screen before him, mesmerized by the images he scrolled through from his memory card. The solar filters that had been on the camera pre-totality had kept his gaze through the lens free from the threat of sun damage, but had limited his ability to see up close the sun's movement with his naked eye. Now displayed on the screen in

front of him, Larkin's breath was taken away.

Larkin kept scrolling. His heart jumped and goosebumps prickled his forearms when he got to the image of totality.

Larkin thought about the careful coincidences that had to take place to lead up to this one moment, this one instant, this one image that looked like a halo of brilliant light, encircling a seemingly impending darkness. How literally, the sun and moon and fate had to align for this day to become actualized, so that they could watch the simple beauty of space and time unite, cloaking them all in a moment of awe and reprieve.

Larkin cropped the image in closer. The picture had been taken right at the end of totality so that the upper left-hand side had an extra sparkle on it.

The diamond ring effect, it was called. A perfect union.

Larkin's gaze faltered from the screen. A perfect union. The argument he had had with his fiancé last night made their relationship seem much less than. He sighed, and plucked himself off his seat in front of his desktop.

His phone was still lying face down on his bedroom floor, right where it had landed after he had chucked it against his wall after he hung up around midnight last night. Larkin reached down to pick it up. A crack split the screen from the bottom left corner and threaded a spider web of broken glass up towards the top right. And it was dead.

It took several moments for the phone to turn back on once plugged in, and Larkin held his breath for every second that ticked by, both dreading the phone call he had to dial and knowing that he had to make things right. It hadn't been fair for him to get as upset as he did when his fiancé admitted that his parents knew nothing about the engagement, especially when Larkin had withheld that same information from his own twin sister. But Larkin had rationalized that he had reason for that- Lindsay had enough shit going on in her own love life rather than worrying about him. Larkin, however, had no reason to say the things that he did last night, no matter how sharp the arrow of rage was that pierced his heart when Parker had said, *"I haven't said anything yet... I know how they will react and*

it won't be good... they don't know anything... they don't know me."

"What do you mean?"

"It's not just you they don't know about. They don't know about me, either. They think I've been dating a girl this whole time."

Larkin's heart stuttered. "What are you saying, Parker?"

"I'm saying I don't know if I can go through with this yet. I need more time, is all."

"Time, huh?" Larkin scoffed and his anger boiled. "Time to figure out if you really want to marry me? Or time to come up with a half assed apology because maybe this whole time I was just an experiment for you? A nice trial run that you can't tell your mum and dad about because they would disown you or something? Parker, you're a grown ass man, you need to fucking live your own life and I'm pretty sure, what you are trying to do is not that. But, I guess now I can say I don't know you that well after all because I thought we had something worth fighting a bit harder for." Hypocrite. Larkin had been a hypocrite.

"Larkin, please don't say that-"

Click. *Larkin hung up and hurled his phone across the room.*

His phone finally flashed white on its screen; thank god it was still functional. Larkin's home screen came up, a selfie of him and Parker on the day he had proposed.

Larkin couldn't help but let the corner of his mouth tug up in a half smile at the memory of that day as he swiped open his screen.

9:54 a.m.
MISSED CALL
Parker King

Larkin's heart fluttered at the sight of his name. He was going to fix this. He pressed the call back button. It went straight to voicemail.

"Hey! This is Parker King. Sorry I couldn't get to the phone. Leave a message and I'll call you back as soon as I can." Beep.

"Hey Park... It's me... I just wanted to call and say that I'm sorry. I didn't mean what I said last night. I was mad, and I wasn't fair to you at all," Larkin took a shaky breath through the phone. "I need to know that we are going to be okay. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and forever is a damn long time, so I'm willing to wait while you figure everything out with your parents and whoever else. I'll always wait for you," Larkin sighed. "Please just call me when you get this, okay? I'm right here waiting on you. I'm so sorry, Parker. I love you."

Click.

Green Eyes, Wild

Almeda Christensen

It happens I'm tired of being awake
And watching his gasps every second,
A blue-lipped fish out of water.
I want to see him in my dreams
So I can hold him near.

It happens I'm tired of being awake
And seeing his green eyes, wild-open,
Envisioning something I can only feel,
And then feeling it no more.
It's strange that I miss what I never knew I had.

It happens I'm tired of being awake
And hearing my sister's cries echoing every second
While I stroke his head, thankful he can't hear.
(Everything has to be about her.)
She gets hugs while I stand alone, next to him.

It happens I'm tired of being awake
And no longer hearing the music of his soul-
The sympathetic resonance
That I held close because he was always around.
That was all I had of him.
It is so quiet now.

It happens I'm tired of being awake
And knowing we will shroud him in family tradition.
A penny. A feather. Tin, copper, tobacco,
And a lock of my cancerous red hair.
My sister thinks I am jealous of her.

I am jealous, instead, of him.

When I See the Birds

Tori Henry

On my right rib, there are the silhouettes of four flying birds. They symbolize freedom. Freedom that I was deprived of up until the very moment that I had them placed on my body.

The day which I decided to get these tattoos was a Saturday. The day started off slow. I laid in my bed, shooting a blank stare at the ceiling, contemplating what I was going to do to make the day less dull. There was a Saturday morning silence that I felt I had earned. All of the sudden, it was broken by the loud, obnoxious, overused blues song that my mother had as her ringtone. I jammed my headphones in and began scrolling on Snapchat, watching people's stories to try and block out the undesired noise.

While watching the stories, I came across a girl from my high school who had gotten a tattoo that morning- and then something sparked in me. Just like that, I knew how to spice up my day and make it ten times better. Without any further thought, I texted my cousin, Lauryn, who happens to be my best friend, and persuaded her to come to my house for something very important. I figured that if I was putting something permanently on my body, I would need someone with me who will permanently be in my life, and who would be better than my best friend?

Usually, I'm not the person who makes impulsive decisions. I was always taught by my mother to "think before you take action." Therefore, I always thoroughly thought about the decisions I made. So, deciding to get a tattoo on that morning was very abnormal. However, I thought repeatedly to myself, "I'm eighteen. I can choose my own freedom." I texted Lauryn and said, "What are you doing today? Come over!" One hour later, she was sitting in my living room and I was explaining to

her the plan. She looked at my wide-eyed. "Tori. You just woke up and wanted a tattoo?" she asked. I could tell she was confused and nervous for me, but not once did she try to change my mind or tell me that I would regret my decision. She supported me every minute from when I sent her that text. Of course, she asked me if I was sure about it after calling me crazy over a hundred times. But sometimes, it's good to be crazy.

As we walked to the tattoo shop, we talked about different tattoo ideas, even though I already had one in mind. The heat outside made me sweat a slight bit more than the thought of getting a tattoo. Even though the walk was only five blocks, it felt more like ten miles. It took us a few minutes to find the tattoo shop. Instead of being aligned with the neighboring buildings, the entrance was pushed in further which made it hard to find. There were no signs in plain sight. It seemed as if they were trying to be some sort of secret location. We hesitated, but finally decided to go in. As I opened the door, I wondered what my mother would say about me doing this. I heard her voice loud and clear but went in anyway. I glanced around the shop. There were about six men just sitting there waiting. "You sure you want to do this?" she whispered to me. I looked at her, gave a nervous smile, and nodded. I didn't know if I was ready but as long as I had her by my side, everything would be okay.

After filling out some paperwork and presenting my ID, I showed the artist what I wanted done. He took a minute to trace it on a piece of paper and then told me that he was ready. After setting up the chair and his station, he told me to lay down. He was a huge man. Someone who I would avoid if I were walking down the street. He had dreadlocks that reached the middle of his back. His face, much like the other five men who sat around, was not very welcoming. A baby couldn't even make him smile. Before laying down, I turned around, looked at Lauryn, and asked her to move her chair closer to me so I could see her while I was getting the art put on my body. She did, without any hesitation, and proceeded to hold my hand. It was at this moment when I got a glimpse of our past.

Lauryn, being my cousin, was always around during my

childhood. We would always see each other on the weekends when I went to her house or at dance class, and even weekdays at Mom-Mom's house during the summer. When I went to her house on Saturdays, we would play outside with other children on her block along with her brother and our other cousin. I knew the people in her neighborhood better than in my own. We did everything together. Sometimes I like to mess with her and say that she was named after me because my middle name is "Lauryn." She always replies, "No, I wasn't," and shakes her head sweetly.

Over the years, things began to change. Spending too much time with someone can damage your relationship. That's what had started to happen. On the weekdays that we spent at Mom-Mom's house, I was responsible for cooking and cleaning because my grandmother was elderly and couldn't do it by herself. I was upset at the fact that I had to be a caretaker for kids who were basically the same age as me. So, I started expressing my irritation. One day, I walked into dance class and completely ignored her. I'm sure she was confused, being that she had done nothing wrong. Sometimes I would boss her around because I thought I had power, being the older cousin. The guilt that I feel now because of the things I've done and the way I've acted to a person who has done nothing but love me unconditionally is tremendous.

When my Mom-Mom passed, my extended family started to become more distant. Losing the person who had brought Lauryn and I close together was heartbreaking, but it gave me a reality check. It was time for me to mature. I had to keep our friendship and fun times alive despite the loss of our foundation. I accepted her love that was expressed to me and we started to grow together again. Ever since, we have been stronger than ever. She is there for me whenever I need her, any hour of the day. We share secrets with each other. We call each other every day. We still have sleepovers just like we did when we were kids. I even have my own bed in her room. She's everything I could ask for in a best friend. She remained by my side through childhood and through getting my tattoo. After those thirty

minutes of pain, squeezing hands, and a constant buzzing from the needle, my tattoo was finished. For a couple weeks, she was the only one who knew about my tattoo. Not even my mother knew.

My whole life, I've felt trapped. Trapped in a house with someone who claimed to love me but couldn't show it. My mother wanted everything her way, never listened to anyone else, and never looked at the bigger picture. In my early childhood, this drove my mind into some sort of prison that was hard for me to escape. My outlet from this pain was Lauryn. That is the reason why I spent so much time at her house and with her at my Mom-Mom's house. I was trying to escape. I was looking for love elsewhere. When I turned 18, I felt as if I had found the key to get out, and I finally used it.

When I see the birds that I've had permanently placed on my rib, I don't think about those years of bondage. I think about the unconditional love and support that I've found along the way. When I didn't find unconditional love in someone who I thought I could, I found it elsewhere. When I see the birds, I think about my new found freedom. Freedom that I've found being away from a place that I called home. When I see the birds, I think about the person who is always there for me despite what I've done. The one who will never judge me for simply being human. I don't think about my mother who suppressed me for years, but I think about the outlet that I had. The one who held my hand through the pain. I think about my cousin. I think about my best friend. Lauryn.

Freaks & Geeks

Rachel Laurie

People are so obsessed with being beautiful they are forgetting to be real. There is wonder in the ordinary and magic in the mundane. Or at least that's what Hayden liked to believe. He wasn't one to be unique or unusual. He wasn't handsome. He didn't have a billowing, tall frame or rippling muscles. All outsiders would do is have their eyes scan over his average appearance, and his face would never cross their mind again. Even his mother forgot about him and his dad seemed not to care. But rather than being bored, Hayden enjoyed the absolute dreariness of his life. That is until his twenty first birthday. On that one remarkable day out of twenty-one years of seemingly nothingness, he met her.

This birthday Hayden wanted something different. Nights by himself were getting a bit lonely, so he decided to go out. To a bar. His goal was not to meet a girl, but as the fates would have it, he did. She did not look at him like he was special. It was not love at first sight. The way they met and the reason Laney started a conversation with this boy is because he blew chunks all over her new shoes. He did not know they were new shoes at the time, but oh did she let him know.

Laney was yelling and Hayden just stared and stared, willing this girl to shut up. Finally, when she wouldn't shut up, he had walked straight into the bathroom where she couldn't follow him, or so he had thought.

"Hey, what the hell?" Laney said right behind Hayden, which had made him jump.

"What are you doing in the boy's bathroom, you can't be in here!" Hayden said.

"Believe it or not, I can do whatever I want, it's a free country. And also, you can't vomit on my shoes and not say anything."

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to, I haven't ever had this much alcohol before," Hayden answered a bit embarrassed.

Laney raised her eyebrows, and she grabbed Hayden's hand. He felt her tiny fingers within his own and thought it must be heaven. His hands were clammy and he hoped she didn't notice. He followed her to the grimy bar, where she eventually let go. From then on, he thought of endless ways in which he could hold that tiny hand again.

"So, are you out here all alone?" Laney asked.

"Yeah, it's actually my twenty first birthday. Why are you alone?" Hayden replied.

"It's your birthday and you're alone?!"

"Yeah, I always am. Why are you alone?"

"That's weird. You're not mental are you?"

"No of course not, but really, why are you-"

"Good, let's go."

She grabbed his hand again and it was like falling down the rabbit's hole. Or being transported to a magical world where everything was bright colors and the faded bricks that surrounded them slid away to magical gardens filled with whimsical fountains and creatures. Basically, holding her hand was like doing shrooms, and he had never wanted to try a drug this bad. He didn't think of where she was taking him. He didn't think of what could happen.

They walked for a bit and it had been cold that night. Hayden didn't realize how far they had walked until she finally let go of his hand. Even with the temperature being what it was, when their hands broke apart sweat was dripping down. He had looked at where they were, a modern art museum.

"Uh, what are we doing here? This place has been closed for hours," Hayden said to Laney. But, she hadn't even bothered giving him an answer. Instead, she pulled out a key and within seconds the door was open. She didn't even look back at him, she had just walked in. And without further ado, Hayden was pulled in, too.

"My dad works here," Laney said as she turned on the lights. Fluorescent lights slowly turned on until they were at full force

drenching the whole place and Laney's face with the harsh light. The shadows that usually make people look hideous had just made Laney look more mysterious. She continued her walk, and he followed. She had brought him into a room where the lights were still dim. She walked to a projector in the back and suddenly the room was illuminated with different lights. There were pinks, blues, yellows, purple, and greens all arranged into a display of pure beauty. Just as all of the colors were blended together, they shut off. Blackness filled the room and stars filled the room. Not just stars, but constellations, with black holes as backgrounds and exploding stars. All of them ceaselessly folding into each other and just as beautiful as the colored lights before it.

Hayden looked over at Laney, expecting her to be in just as much wonder as he was, but her eyes were closed. Hayden reached for her hand. All he had wanted was to hold her. She slid her hand out of reach at the slightest of touch. Suddenly, the whole room was just black and Laney walked out. Hayden caught up wither her as she was turning off the lights. He followed her as she locked up, and they left the art museum.

"What was all of that about?" Hayden asked.

"Nothing. Let's go," Laney said.

"Go where?!" Hayden shouted, but they were already running.

She winded her way through the city to a rooftop that overlooked the city. Laney started playing music and not just listened but danced. She tried to get Hayden to join, but even with alcohol in his system, Hayden refused. He just stared at the city and eventually lied down. It felt like hours passed and he was just stuck in limbo, not coherent, but not asleep. He was just there with a strange girl dancing around.

After what seemed like a lifetime, Laney grabbed his hand to lift him up. "We need to go back to the bar, I need another drink."

They traversed their way back through town. Clumsily, slowly, but making progress. The night was almost over, and it was going to be morning soon. He had stared at Laney,

wondering what would happen when the sun does come up. Would they go home together? Does he get her number? He had never asked or received a girl's number before. Nevertheless, he knew his life had been changed after this. He didn't find comfort in being boring anymore. They reached the bar and they both went in.

They both get what they had earlier, and they just sat there in silence. Once they're done, they closed out their tabs and went outside. Hayden didn't want to leave, but Laney didn't grasp his hand for a new adventure. He did what he wanted for the first time, and he tried to kiss her. But before he could, she turned and pushed him away. He stumbled back, nearing the street corner. Laney shook her head and Hayden started to question everything they did. Everything he did. He started to back away, not realizing he was backing up right into the street. A car came rushing by and as he tried to stumble to get away from Laney, the car hit him dead on. Laney screams and was left standing there outside a bar. 12:01 am. It is officially his birthday.

Snow

Connor Nagaki

Rainfall is the cold blanket
You draw tighter to try and
Forget who He is.
Forget that sweet, tender laughter.
Forget those dark, malleable eyes.
Forget the slight hunch,
Bending his six-foot frame
From a God
To a man
Leaning down to
Pick you up
Off the ground.

Rainfall is the imaginary lover
Who cries into your hair
Because no matter how
They hold you,
you only remember Him
And you'll look at His window.
Wondering what He's doing.
Hoping His heart bleeds with the same want
that yours drenches the sheets with
Every night before you sleep.
But looking at His window,
You didn't notice.
The Rain left.

And you,
You are but snow:
Pure, untouched,

Safe.
Until you fall to Him.
He sullies you with
His warmth
Turning you back
into unimaginative water.
But you'll still fall.
Because Gravity and Attraction
are both sinking ships in an
Ocean of reality.
And while he calls you beautiful,
To him you are just
snow.

Snow he'll sacrifice for the Sun.
He'll always love the Sun.
Your frosted embrace dissipates into
memories
As strong rays embrace his skin.
The same skin that melted me.
And while the beauty is truth,
He lies.
Because who wants to give up the Sun?
Because snow may be Beautiful.
But the Sun is
Everything.

A Soldier's Son

Kayle Mason

"You can always talk to me if you need to." I've heard it a thousand times from concerned parents, sympathetic teachers, and obligated counselors. Many people do not understand the burdens that come with having a family member in the military. As a ten-year-old youth, I used to think it was the coolest occupation in the world; a Dad who traveled the world fighting. On the day before my Dad deployed for his second tour, he gave me a size-small olive drab t-shirt that sported a silly yet intimidating cartoon symbolization of the division he leads. The shirt stood out and drew many people's attention. People curious enough would ask me twenty questions in regard to my connection with the shirt. Every conversation was generally the same: "I noticed your shirt, does your family serve in the military? Has he ever killed anyone before? What is it like when he was deployed? Are you worried about him every day? Do you miss him a lot?" The probing questions and deep inquiries bothered me. Before wearing the shirt, I was never really asked much about my Dad. The questions I was asked while wearing the shirt forced me to think through conflicting feelings about my Dad's involvement in his line of work.

The more conversations I was forced to have, the more I started to reflect on these questions. Of course, I missed my Dad a lot, but I never thought about his safety when he was deployed because I assumed he was a superman, and my Dad. The constant questions also made me wonder why people were asking these questions about only my family's situation. I became aware of the special attention that I was receiving from others; it bothered me. As I reflected on my Dad and I's predicament, it became painfully obvious that there was a very real chance I would never see him again and others around me

knew it as well. It felt like others were trying to console me as if my Dad had a death sentence.

Soon it was visibly apparent on my face that my Dad's involvement in the military upset me. I stopped wearing the shirt, and people stopped asking me questions about my Dad. My favorite shirt was now a stale cloth wadded up in the back of my drawer. Many older figures tried to reach out to me as a confident and father figure in hopes that I would stay focused on school. Even the head master called me into his office to discuss the concerns he and other teachers had for me. He explained to me my dropping grades and withdrawn attitude in class and in the hall ways, how this type of behavior would lead to a very long and painful year, and the need for these problems to be corrected. He asked me if there was anything I would like to talk about. "No," I answered dismissively, and marched out. It was obvious what topic he was alluding to talking about and it frustrated me.

I attempted to scrub my brain of the questions people had asked me about my Dad. One question that started to stand out the more I thought about it was: "has my dad ever killed someone?" I did not know definitively if he had or not, but I always answered the question with a dismissive "I don't know." I realized that my Dad's time in the middle east has probably put him in positions where he needed to lay down justice; he probably has killed someone. At first, I was bothered by this. My Dad, a butcher. As a middle schooler, I was always told that there are sins that should never been broken. My Dad's military career likely meant that he has killed, making him a murderer.

The thought of a gunman father scared me. Even as an intermittent church attendee, I knew that those who killed were going to the lake of fire. I thought my Dad was going to hell for his evil job that made him do evil things. I didn't think that I would be able to interact with him when he got back. I thought I was going to look at him like a condemned man.

One week before my Dad was due to finally return home, our school had a veteran's day assembly. A speaker came to address the importance of veteran's day. He spoke of his reasons

and situation that lead him to his decision to join the military, but I applied everything he said to my Dad. At the end of his speech my Dad was an irreplaceable soldier, sacrificed his time and lifestyle to serve his country, and joined the military to protect others. The speaker changed my thoughts about my Dad. I accepted the fact that he might be a killer. He was excused by the ever-present needs of the country. His show of loyalty to the country meant that I should be loyal to him and hail him as a hero not a villain.

Everyone cheered the day my Dad returned to the neighborhood. Tight hugs, tears, and smiles were contagious amongst the family and neighbors. The day winded down and people returned to their lives. In a moment when me and him were finally alone I blurted "Dad I know you have probably killed people but it's okay because you did it for the country and I still love you." My statement caught him a little off guard. He started slowly, "Kayle, I joined the military because I wanted to protect the ones I love, I wanted to protect my kids and my wife. I will fight for them, and I will kill... for them." He gave me the dismissive nod and excused himself.

He fought for me and he killed for me to protect me. His military involvement was not for his country, but for the people he loved. The definition of murder is the unjust, premeditated killing of another human being. A soldier that is set to defend his loved ones is justified to use any means necessary to keep them safe. That is the difference between factions; A righteous one is set to protect and an evil one is set to destroy.

My Dad used lethal force righteously to protect his loved ones. It just so happens that the best way to protect them was to protect the land they lived on.

Explicating the Twilight

Megan Rosenthal

If whispered words in winter night
Don't find their way from ear to heart,
I'd move my mouth from cheek to chest
And scribe them
Under covers
In the dark.

I'd spin cursive with our tangled limbs,
Burn your flesh with my fingertip pen,
Sketch a future on your freckled skin,
And sear a kiss
Across your lips
Wondering when

You'll comprehend my silent plea
Threaded through our hands held fast,
Persistent pulse in my left wrist
Thrumming
the same theme
in every draft.

Once upon a time I wrote
The ending that caps happily.
But please erase the dreams drawn up
In haste,
If I'll be but
a memory (...stay with me.)

Take Off Your Pants, Stay A While

Janyce Wardlaw

She really should have taken the day off. She was so nervous and could hardly get herself dressed this morning. She spent the better part of the week preparing for tonight's dinner and making her Brooklyn brownstone appear like the trappings of an up and coming New York attorney on the threshold of making partner.

Tracy Tompkins was truly on her way. She had defied the odds ever since the 6th grade when her parents split up, leaving her and her two younger brothers wondering what went wrong. Her mother totally did the Kramer Versus Kramer thing and her father just couldn't handle raising three kids alone while still chasing his dream of becoming a famous musician. Many nights and weekends it was Tracy who held down the house and made sure the boys had dinner and did their homework. It was a wonder they all made it to college and it was a point of pride for Tracy. Twenty years later, one brother was teaching high school math, the other was clawing his way up Wall Street, cultivating the one percent, and she was on the fast track at one of New York's most sought-after law firms. All this while a mother continued to be missing in action and a father, strung out on drugs was still taking music gigs here and there to make ends meet.

In all these years Tracy hadn't been able to make sense of what went wrong between her mother and father. It haunted her, permeating every aspect of her life and affected her judgment as far as suitors were concerned. She was unlucky in love a few times over and felt certain this time would be no different. But something about this guy made her want to try harder, to relax and let divine intervention do its thing. If it worked out, great. If it didn't, she'd be okay because she'd been here so many

times before.

Simon Jennings had just joined the firm six months ago. He was a formidable presence standing about six feet, four inches tall and weighing in at a strapping, but sleek 250. He was a southern transplant from Alabama who played football for the Crimson Tide, abandoned the gridiron upon graduation and sailed through Duke Law. When Simon came on board it was as if the Crimson Tide itself had swept over the dozen or so lawyers at the firm. He was confident, intelligent, personable, and oh so yummy. He wasn't the typical asshole lawyer mowing over everything in his path to partner. Tracy took notice almost immediately. Simon, equally impressed with Tracy, did likewise and they started dating three months in.

Tonight was a milestone. It marked the end of the "no-nookie" period and Tracy was ready. Simon had not done anything sinister or stupid during the 90-day trial and he didn't hound her about when he would be a guest in her bed. Instead, he learned her. He knew her background, her struggles at the firm, and her non-negotiable ambitions. Yet Simon pursued as a patient potential mate, ever so considerate, understanding, and yes romantic. It all seemed too good to be true, but Tracy pressed forward with no inflated expectations and she was prepared for the other shoe to drop.

The cleaning lady had been to the brownstone twice this week. Tracy hired a caterer, a friend who had great attention to detail and the tone of the evening. When Tracy had suggested serving oysters, the caterer vetoed saying it was too forward, like offering her vagina on a platter. They settled on Italian fare, pasta, bread, wine and tiramisu for dessert. Everything seemed in place.

Tracy wouldn't see Simon in the office today. He was out with clients and she was working with her team on a deposition. Her concentration level was low and she had to force herself to focus. Eight o'clock was the appointed time and it seemed the hours ticked off more slowly than usual. On the subway home, Tracy turned over every little detail in her mind, a couple of times even speaking aloud for emphasis or to remind herself of

something that would require her special attention.

The brownstone smelled heavily of bleach and lavender scented Fabuloso - her cleaning products of choice. But that was not the ambiance she wanted. Tracy hauled out one of her good candles, a $30 Seda France in Japanese Blossom and lit it. It was 7:10 and the food was in place. Tracy put a lot of thought into what she would wear and had the ensemble ready to put on once she emerged from the bathtub. Layered in Jo Malone's blackberry and bay scented bath gel, body cream, and perfume - Tracy donned the crepe designer black sheath with the butterfly sleeves and the hem hitting way above the knee, but way below the goodie trail. After the oyster blunder, she wanted something between Judy Garland's Wizard of Oz and Sharon Stone's Basic Instinct.

The sound of the buzzer made her jump. She had to calm herself before opening the door. Tracy could see Simon was looking forward to this as much as she was. The expression on his face said it all. He took in the brownstone in a sweeping look, nodding approval and then stopped his gaze on Tracy. His eyes widened slightly and he parted his lips as if to say something, but no words came out. Finally, he told her she looked incredible, smelled amazing, and he couldn't wait to eat... dinner.

They steered the conversation away from work and talked about their dreams and plans for the future. They had explored this subject before in the three months of dating, but tonight it was more inclusive, more personal. Tracy was giddy inside at how well the evening was going and at the prospect of what was to come. When suddenly, the mingling aromas of garlic, lavender, Jo Malone, and Japanese blossom were overtaken by something pungent and offensive. Another sewage backup? No! Not tonight. That would completely kill the mood. She searched Simon's face trying to discern whether or not he was smelling what she was smelling. What she found was horror and concern. Then he confessed. He was allergic to tomatoes. The pasta sauce was doing a number on his insides and he couldn't seem to control the ensuing gas and eventual diarrhea.

What the hell? Why didn't he say he was allergic to tomatoes when he watched her ladle the sauce over the angel hair pasta? He didn't want to hurt her feelings or spoil the evening and thought he could keep the symptoms at bay at least for a night. No can do. In a matter of minutes, Tracy was playing nurse and maid, trying to curtail the diarrhea and spot-cleaning the sofa. This was not at all how she imagined tonight would go. But she felt a strange affection and heightened attraction for this guy who was writhing in pain, pants-less in her bed, apologizing with every available breath for ruining an otherwise perfect evening. No need, she assured him. As she lay next to him mopping his brow with a cold, wet cloth, waiting for the Imodium to kick in, she thought this was not at all how she thought they would end up in bed together. But, it was somehow perfect and she knew in that moment that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

Understanding

Chip McGee

When I was young
I didn't know what the word crisp meant.
I just thought it meant good.
As in, a crisp potato chip
Or a crisp apple.

One time,
When I was at church, in August,
I turned to a member
Sweating through his seersucker
And said "beautiful crisp day, ain't it?"
And he stared at me the same way
The whole congregation did
That time that I asked for seconds
Of the crackers and grape juice
Not knowing what that was either.

But then, last October, I went hiking with you
And the leaves crunched under your feet
And I heard the wind whistle
Through the gorge, deep
And cut by a river flowing with
Cold, needle-y water
And I smelled a bonfire,
Some barn's fire,
And I got it.

Another Thing

Olivia Larson

what are you?
not a who?
label yourself
it'll make it easier,
we promise.
let us categorize
you, you
are not a name
or a person
just a thing
with skills
to be used.
not a who.
what are you?

Sweetie Wins

Almeda Christensen

I woke up in daylight, knowing that I was the gem, the jewel, the rare and precious stone that everyone wanted. I felt as strong as marble.

I also woke up in a room I didn't recognize. I stood up and looked into the mirror. I was solidified, real. Last night, I had felt like electricity, like air.

What happened? How did I get here? I heard the low rumble of Jason's bass guitar. Was there school today? I needed to borrow Jason's chemistry notes...

The mirror warped, carnival-style. I held my hand in front of me. I was still strong as marble, but my hand was melting and solidifying rapidly.

"The acid," I said to no one. I was alone on this room.

"Do you trust me?" Paul had whispered in my ear. He had pulled me close to him and held me. I could smell the vodka and cigarettes through his skin. The studio upstairs was lit, but we didn't walk up those wooden steps.

I stared at his blue eyes, what little I could see of them in the window-light of the studio. His pupils were dilated. Paul gently let go of me and pulled out a brown vial.

"How long have you had that?" I said. My mouth was watering as I snatched the vial and tipped it into my palm.

"I can have..." I hesitated.

"The whole thing, yes," Paul laughed.

I carefully drew a small line on my left palm, and inhaled. I had wanted to take this generous birthday gift in increments, but it wasn't hitting me fast enough. I drew another line, thicker this time. There was more in the vial than I had thought.

Paul showed me the crook of his arm, the tiny square paper stuck to his skin.

"Time for some fun," he said.

I took a lick, with the paper resting salty and metallic on my tongue. "This one tastes weird."

"It's the new one," Paul told me. "I got it just for us, to celebrate this beautiful day."

"I love you," I said. Oh, no. That did it. It was the quickest way to see him run, and I didn't like being open, just to have him run away. Paul had stopped me every other time I had tried to tell him. I didn't want to be in love with him, and he didn't want to love me. He had always said, "Love is just a social construct used to make money."

"I love you, Svetlana," Paul said this time. Not "Sweetie," my nickname, but my real name. I felt an electric flash of hope. My body relaxed and swayed. Paul held me close and sang softly to me, from a song that he and his band had written, "Oh little girl/ I can show you what's inside my world/ anything you want is yours..."

I felt everything in the moments that followed: every blade of grass creaking as it grew, every cricket vibration. Paul's skin crackled and I heard lilting moon songs in the air. I breathed in slowly, greedily, and held myself there. Time had stopped in that moment. I felt every pulse of the wind. I closed my eyes.

"Do you trust me?" Paul whispered again. I felt his hand on my cheek, and then his hand covered my eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"This night is all for you," Paul said. He removed his hand, but I kept my eyes closed. He slipped a soft cloth over them, and tied the cloth behind my head. His breathing was strong and steady. It pushed into and then pulled out of my soul.

I heard every crunch of the gravel, and then the soft whisper of grass. Pine scents cleaned my lungs, and the trees hissed in the warm breeze. I was the ether that raced in between atoms, in between branches. Frogs and crickets sang in the distance. Paul's breathing grew shorter as we walked up a hill that ended in a sharp incline. I could hear a guitar and some

drums, and voices. I heard the distinct voices of Paul's other band members, Jon, Jason, and Oscar. I heard male and female voices I didn't recognize.

"Oy! Somebody help me get her up!" Paul shouted to the sky.

A chorus of "Hey Paul" rang at a slight distance. I heard a thump beside me. Large hands grabbed my forearms while two separate arms wrapped around my thighs from underneath. I was hoisted up onto a flat rock, and led to a cushion of blankets and pillows.

"Lie down and relax, love," Paul said, "and let us do the work."

I was guided onto my back, and people began tying my wrists and ankles.

"I do the tying!" I struggled. Paul knew I didn't like being the submissive.

"It's okay, sweetie," said a female voice. I didn't recognize her. She couldn't have known my name.

"We'll be here the whole time," said another woman. "No one will hurt you. We promise."

My wrists, ankles and thighs were tied.

I felt hands on me; thousands of volts of purple electricity were left behind with each touch. Large hands, smaller hands, wisps of hot breath, tongues- each had their own energetic signature. Their colors painted my skin: I was the Mona Lisa, I was Madeline After Prayer, I was Venus in all her renditions. Operatic moans chorused around me, different voices, for hours and hours. Their cries of pleasure penetrated my soul. I sang with them through the night.

The birds took over, and I fell asleep.

The mirror glinted. I felt solid. Paul loved me. I still had no idea what room I was in, but that didn't matter. Paul loved me and I loved him; he was my rock god and I was his groupie. Jason's bass guitar rumbled out the riff for "Come as You Are," by Nirvana. I must be somewhere in the studio.

I went to the door and opened it quickly. The resulting vacuum sucked in the red Asian tapestry that hung on the back wall of Paul's studio. I never knew that tapestry hid a door.

I walked through the tapestry rather clumsily, and emerged into the studio. Oscar was nearby, resetting his drums.

"Hello-o-o!" Oscar said. He had a smirk on his face. Jon stopped tuning his guitar, and gave me a brief head-nod. Paul looked up and laughed, hard. I looked in the two-way mirror to see what he could be laughing at, but I saw nothing wrong or funny. Even though I looked amazing, I still felt self-conscious at his laughter.

"Don't worry, Sweetie, he'll come around. He always does," Oscar said, and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

Jason, the bass player, was standing next to the front entrance. I caught him staring at me, wide-eyed, as a group of girls came tittering in. Jason looked like he wanted to say something to me, but my eyes were burning into Paul at that moment. Paul was hugging the redhead just a little bit too long.

"It was nice talking to you, Paul," I said loudly from across the studio. "I have to get going, now."

Paul let go of the redhead and looked into her eyes.

"Did you have a good trip?" He asked her. Then he turned to the brunette on his right. "Hello, love, my name is Paul. I bet you have a beautiful name."

"It's Nancy," said the brunette. She gave a braying laugh.

Gravity tugged at the corners of my mouth.

I will never be this weak again.

I put my hand in my pocket, felt the vial there, and slowly slipped it out into my hand.

And then I let go.

All notes and voices stopped. The gravity lifted from my face.

"See you at school, Sweetie," Jason said and I walked toward the front entrance. We high-fived, and I walked out in my black stilettos, never looking back.

And Thank God Nothing Ever Lasts

Ro Smith

It just so happens that I am tired of being
Anything in a country loud with talk
And little change, a city in a state
With red flags flying after pride
When really it's just a warning.
They will stamp across the earth
In boots with steel tips and mouths
Wide open with teeth bared
Like a tiger.

It just so happens that I am tired
Of being one among several of Frankenstein's
Creatures to be hunted, skin stitched
To a furrowed brow in wonder of why
I was created. And still I can't Imagine
How tired everyone else must be.

They're howling
On the news, locked in frame
By the newscaster, wearing suits
Like it's the night of the dance, arguing
Like they've been married for years.
One says it's reasonable that I'm tired,
The other isn't sure that I'm there.

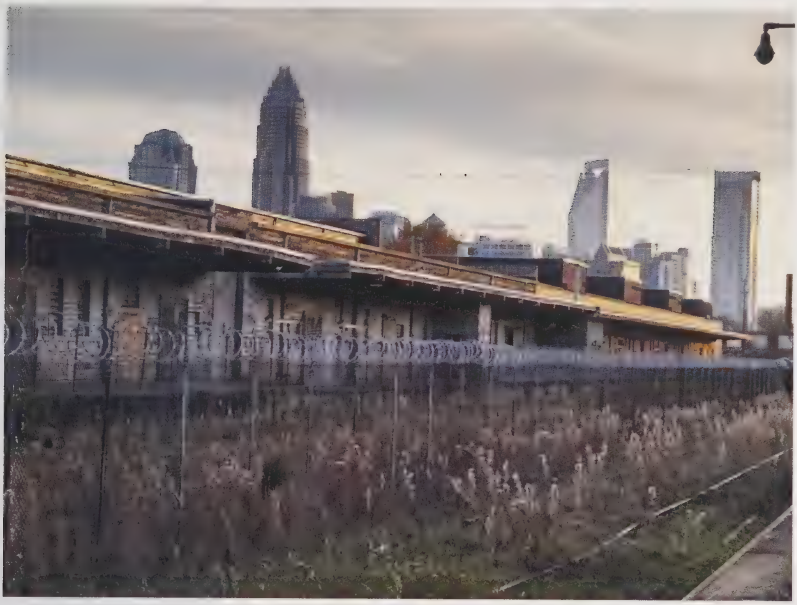
It just so happens that I am tired of being
A sigh on your computer screen, a madman
Barreling down a White House, swearing
And pointing and fucking and getting away
With it all.

It just so happens that I am tired of being
A body that does nothing, a sleep paralysis
Of a person that isn't sure what they could
Do for themselves. And what about others?
It just so happens that I am tired of being
Tired.

Vibrant Street in Vaplaraiso, Chile
Lauren Cassidy

The Skyline Through a Fence
Ashlyn Main

March Snow
Almeda Christensen



Novaturient
Robert Rubino

Queens in the Snow
Ashlyn Main

Italia
Alex Carver

Peeking
Julia Debski

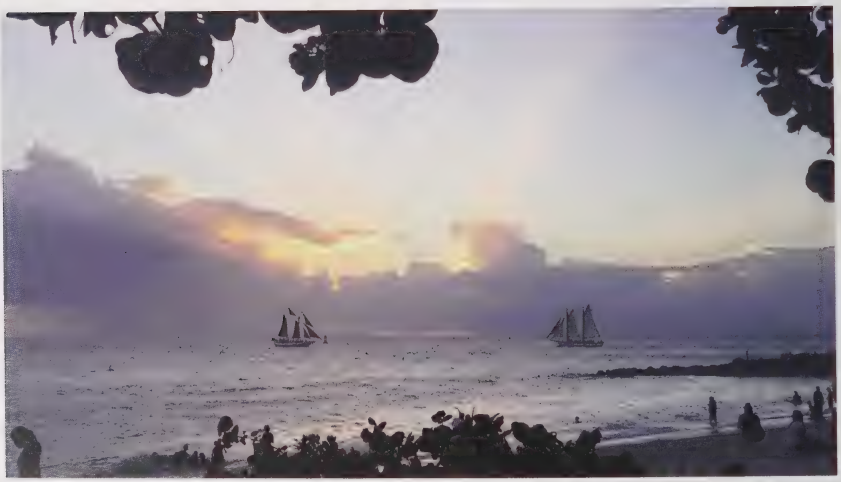
Frozen in Time
Nathan Williams

Fearless
Anthony Raftis

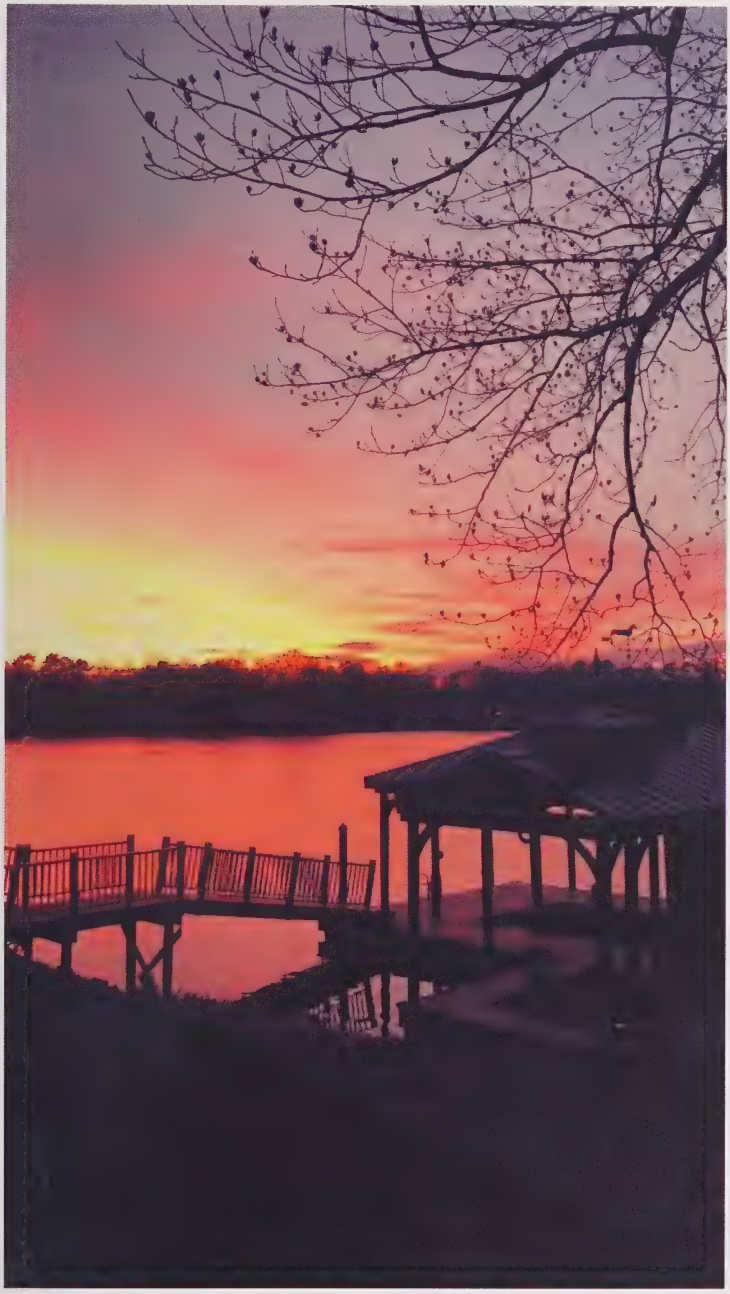
Daunting
Jordan Kramer

Lady in Ink
Natalie Murphie

Local Beauty
Oli Porter



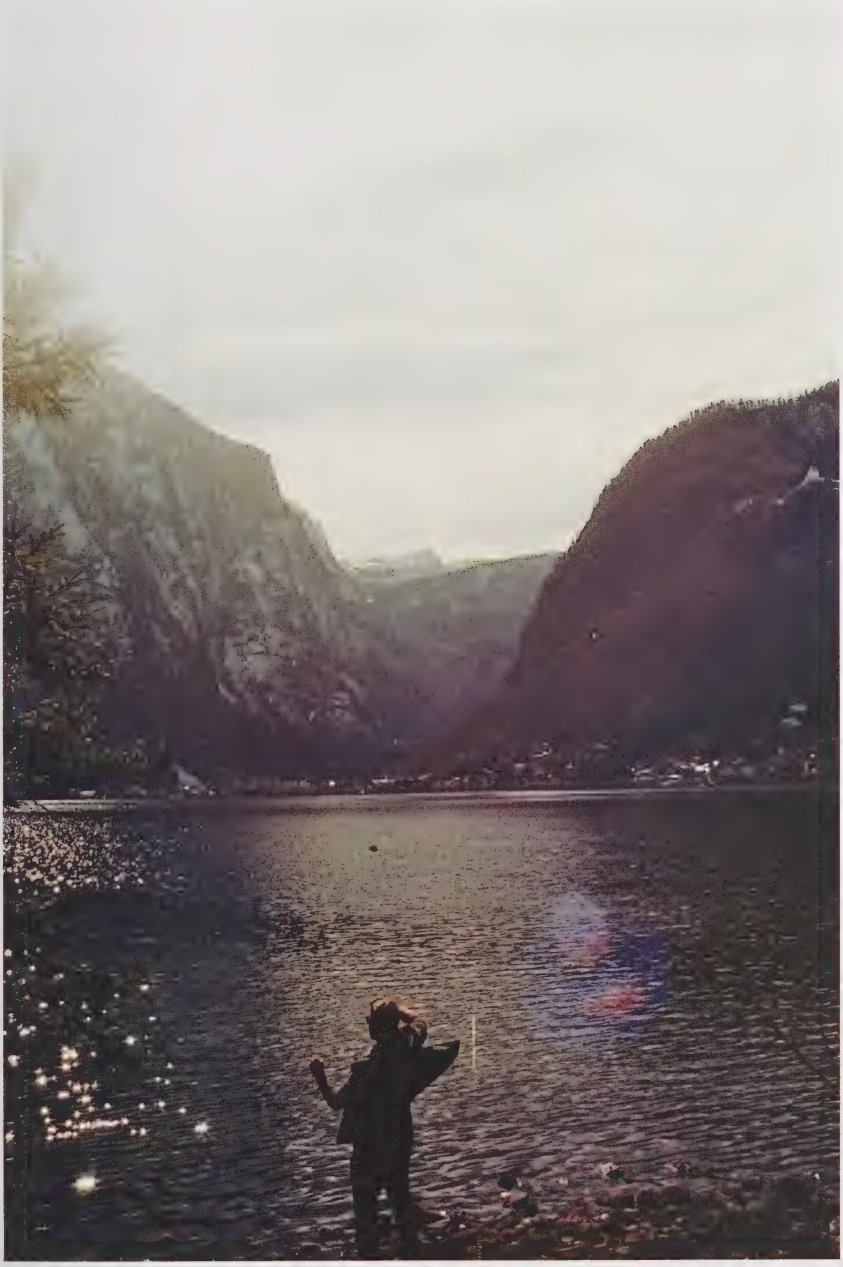
Sailing in Paradise
Stasha Waterfield



Photograph
Elizabeth King

Lightning my Way
Stasha Waterfield

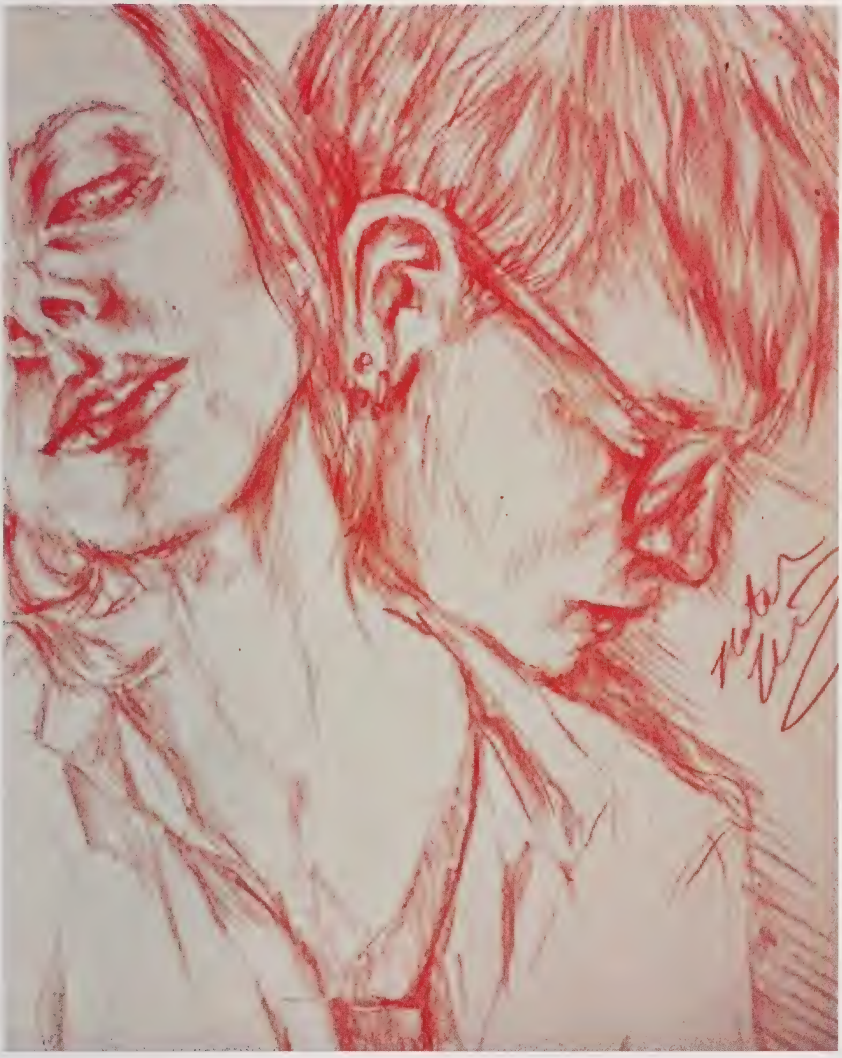
Palacio Baburizza
Lauren Cassidy



Reflection
Julia Debski

High Violet
Marissa Schrader

Beyond
Rachel Laurie



Querida
Natalie Murphy

Sulfur Mud Puts of Hverir
Lauren Cassidy

Sunrise on Cinnamon Beach
Nathan Williams

Centipede
Jordan Kramer

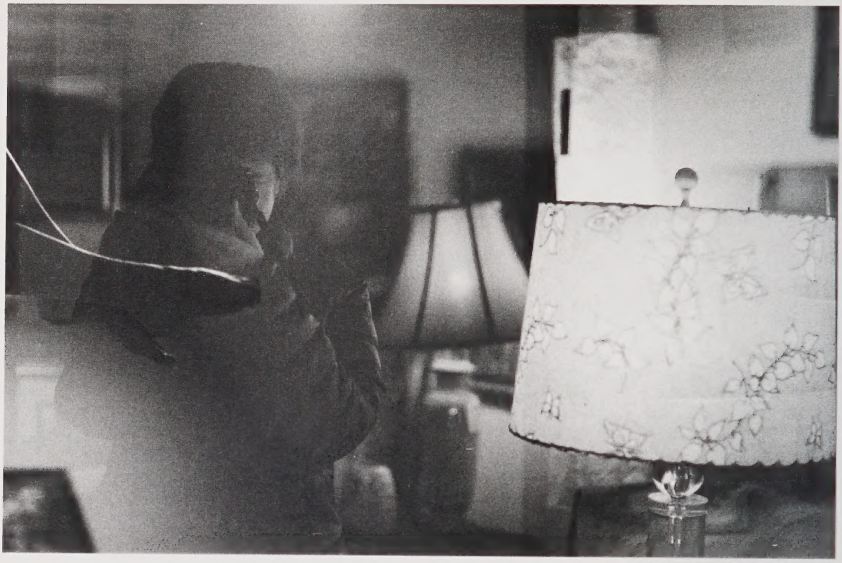
Branching Out
Bridgette Barthe

Iglesia de Zarcero
Oli Porter

Big Maxx
Jordan Kramer

Chaotic Love
Sarah Carlton

Fallen Leaves
Holly Van Kuren



Sleep Well Beast
Marissa Schrader

Through the Fade
Nathan Williams

Where is home?/ Is it the place itself?/ The streets and power lines?/ The walls, windows, doors?/ Is it those you love?/ The friends and families,/ The groups you've built?

Sense of Home
Cara Sparks

Queens Current

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Vibrant Street in Vaplaraiso, Chile
Lauren Cassidy

QUEENS UNIVERSITY of CHARLOTTE | The Arts